

The Labour Governments and the Docks, 1945-51:
International and Industrial Tension.

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Abstract

This account of the 1945-51 Governments emphasises the extent to which its two principle tasks - economic recovery and the containment of communism - coloured its approach to events in the docks. I argue in the first chapter that the Government enjoyed immensely significant support from the TUC in marshalling working class support for the economic recovery and anti-communism. The ensuing chapters look at how the relationship between the Government and the Unions was affected by developments in the docks, an area of vital economic importance given the export-driven strategy for recovery. In the second chapter I examine the long history of the docks, and point out that the Government's tasks were complicated by the long-term failure of its closest ally from 1945, the Transport and General Workers' Union, to organise its docks membership thoroughly. In the enclosed world of the docks, the workforce traditionally adhered to a system of local and sectional loyalties, rather than the national and industrial loyalties demanded by the TGWU. The implications of this tradition, as they were felt in the 1945-1951 period, I examine in three chapters on separate unofficial dock strikes. These all resulted from industrial disputes, yet Government and Trade Union leaders were anxious to portray them as resulting from political subversion. In Chapter Six I argue that this false characterisation was designed to deflect attention from the Union's difficulties in the docks, and also from a number of problems arising from the introduction of the 1947 Dock Labour Scheme. As both of these institutions, the Union and the Scheme, were regarded as essential to economic recovery, the Government was anxious to protect them from public scrutiny. The genuine problems, the real causes of the unofficial action, are also discussed in this analytical chapter. In the final chapter I point out that the continuous portrayal of the strikes as political rather than industrial challenges, eventually caused a great deal of tension between the 1950-51 Government and the TGWU. This considerable private strain is at odds with the conventional historiographical picture of the 1945-51 Governments' relations with the TUC. In addition to qualifying the existing historical understanding of the 1945-51 Governments, this account also reappraises an important and often misunderstood general theme, the relationship between the Labour Party and the Trade Unions.

**I hereby declare that the preparation and composition of
this thesis was entirely my own work.**

James K. Phillips

Preface and Acknowledgements

The main subject of this thesis is the 1945-51 Labour Governments' response to unofficial strike action in the docks industry. It draws attention to the character of the Labour Governments, and reviews the historical significance of the 'Great Alliance' between the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress by examining the extent to which this alliance sustained and supported the 1945-51 Labour Governments. In order to explore these two related questions, I focus on the docks, where the workforce was organised by the Governments' closest Union ally, the Transport and General Workers' Union. At a time of great economic emergency, it was in the docks that the Labour Alliance was at its most important, but, for historical reasons, it was also at its most vulnerable.

In the preparation of this thesis, I have become greatly indebted to a very great number of people and institutions. Starting closest to home, as it were, I would like to thank everyone in the History Department at the University of Edinburgh, and all those associated with the Departmental Modern History Research Seminar. I gladly acknowledge the invaluable assistance given to me at the National Library of Scotland, the University of Edinburgh Library, and the Mitchell Library in Glasgow. Further afield, I am indebted to everyone at the Public Records Office at Kew, especially Mr A.J. McDonald of the Search Department. I am similarly indebted to Mr Richard Storey and Ms Christine Woodland of the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University, and to Mr John Connolly of the Transport and General Workers' Union, who provided access to his Union's records, both at Warwick and at Transport House in London. Thanks are also due to R.J. Carrol, Registrar to the Confederation of British Industry, and Mrs Betty Richmond, Secretary of the British Ports Federation. Mrs Richmond directed me to the Museum of London Library in Limehouse, where Mr Bob Aspinall kindly provided me with access to the records of various port employers' organisations, and generously equipped me with numerous other invaluable references. In addition, I greatly appreciate the assistance of Mr Stephen Bird and Mr Andrew Flinn of the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester. Mr. Flinn, who is currently sorting the files of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers' Union, was especially helpful. For access to materials in the Communist

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFL	American Federation of Labour
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organisations
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CSU	Canadian Seamen's Union
CTLC	Canadian Trades and Labour Congress
ERP	European Recovery Programme
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ITWF	International Transport Workers' Federation
ILP	Independent Labour Party
MLNS	Ministry of Labour and National Service
MoL	Ministry of Labour
MoT	Ministry of Transport
NAPE	National Association of Port Employers
NASDU	National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers' Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDLB	National Dock Labour Board
NDLC	National Dock Labour Corporation
NEC	National Executive Committee (of the Labour Party)
NJC	National Joint Council of the Port Transport Industry
NMM	National Minority Movement
PCF	Parti Communiste Français
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PSI	Partito Socialista Italiano
RCP	Revolutionary Communist Party of Great Britain
RIRO	Regional Industrial Relations Officer (MoL)
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SIU	Seafarers' International Union
STGWU	Scottish Transport and General Workers' Union
STO	Supplies and Transport Organisation
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions

CHAPTER 1

LABOUR IN POWER 1945-51

1945 AND 'THE GREAT ALLIANCE'

For the British Labour Party and its supporters the summer of 1945 was a period of unprecedented triumph and optimism. Following long periods of defeat and frustration between the wars, the labour movement had benefited immeasurably from its participation in the defeat of Nazi Germany and Japan, and now seemed on the verge of formidable achievement at home. Michael Foot evokes the spirit aroused by these developments in the opening lines of his second volume of *Aneurin Bevan*. Veterans of the labour movement who had renewed their faith after each successive disaster - the collapse of the Triple Alliance in 1921, the General Strike in 1926 and the defection of Ramsay MacDonald in 1931 - had 'special cause for exultation' and, with the European conflict over and the war in Asia reaching conclusion:

No socialist who saw it will forget the blissful dawn of July 1945. ... Eyes were fixed on the promise of a new society. Suddenly the vision of the Socialist pioneers had been given substance and historic impetus by the radical political ferment of wartime.¹

The scale of Labour's victory was indeed stunning. With 393 seats the party had earned a Commons majority of 146 over the other parties combined, and office with power for the first time: 'LABOUR IN POWER!' proclaimed the *Daily Herald*. *The Times*, if not as tetchy as the Savoy woman diner who, according to one of the many apocryphal stories that surround the 1945 result, is said to have announced that the country would not stand for the election of a Labour Government, was sceptical nonetheless. The paper's editorial on the morning after the declaration of the results makes for illuminating reading. Emphasising strongly Labour's duty to transcend its apparently sectional, historical basis, it projected the conventional wisdom about the Labour Party and Labour Governments that has very rarely been unpicked: namely that Labour ministers have to govern in a 'national interest' that precludes the realisation of trade unionists' aspirations. In

¹Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan II 1945-60*, p.17.

expressing a charge depressingly familiar to students of Labour Party history, *The Times* effected a curious mixture of the blunt and the evasively bland:

At a bound the Labour Party have overleapt the barrier which hitherto has held them perpetually in a minority and almost continually in opposition. Their mandate now is national, not sectional. It has been furnished for a national programme, not for narrow doctrines or extreme experiments. The close and characteristic connexion of the Labour Party with *certain specialised groups within the community* has at last and suddenly ceased to prevent them from securing the suffrages and support of the broad mass of the British people, and it is of decisive importance in the calculations which confront their leaders to-day that they should embrace only those aspirations which are commonly accepted by the millions of men and women who have voted for them.²

This conventional wisdom about the nature of the relationship between the Labour Party and the Trade Unions attained fresh lustre in the sixties and seventies, and apparently still carries public currency in the early 1990s. In the wake of Labour's fourth successive defeat in April 1992 the party appointed an investigative body to review the party-union links which, it was felt, might have significantly contributed to the party's continued electoral unpopularity. *The Times* leader writer's analysis was, however, extremely misleading. Prior to 1945 Labour's history had indicated the development of a very different relationship between the party and the unions from that allowed by the image of 'union barons' and 'fixers' in 'smoke-filled rooms', propagated by *The Times* leader writer in 1945, and not dispelled by recent commentators.³ Lewis Minkin, appointed in 1992 to

²*The Times*, 27 July 1945; emphasis added.

³To offer two recent examples, one from serious historical writing and the other from radio broadcasting: Ben Pimlott's *Harold Wilson* surveys the myths without disabusing them, noting, for example, that when Heath's retinue searched 10 Downing Street for 'the ingredients of a celebratory supper' after dislodging Labour at the 1970 General Election, 'all they found in the larder was warm beer and sandwiches, a symbolic legacy, they felt, of the vanished era.' (p.560). In the BBC Radio 4 series 'Brothers', written and narrated by Anthony Howard and broadcast between 5-19 January 1993, Heath's personal contribution was limited to a denial that beer and sandwiches had been administered to TUC leaders during his premiership. 'We offered them a very good lunch and some excellent wine', he said. The series, devoted to 'the turbulent history' of the British trade unions since 1945, overall served to perpetuate the myths surrounding the party-union relationship. The second episode, on the struggles over Barbara Castle's 1969 White Paper *In Place of Strife*, was called 'Get Your Tanks Off My Lawn!', despite Hugh Scanlon's assertion that these words, credited to Wilson, had never been uttered.

the body investigating the future party-union relationship, has contributed immeasurably to the understanding of its history, with his recently published and highly acclaimed analysis, *The Contentious Alliance*.⁴

At the outset of his work Minkin emphasises the inestimable historical significance of Labour's ties with industrial organisations, both to socialist political culture and to the wider political environment:

For over 80 years this relationship has shaped the structure and, in various ways, the character of the British Left. Every major group and party in British politics has had to take account of what Keir Hardie called 'the great alliance', whether they regarded it as 'great' or not.⁵

Minkin indicates that critics of the relationship have opposed the apparently sectional commitment to the values and aspirations of trade unionism. Socialist critics - Marxist and non-Marxist - have argued that the influence of a defensive trade union culture has constrained the Labour Party, narrowing the potential for radical economic and social transformation.⁶ On the right the alliance has been held to represent a dangerous political and industrial threat to the constitution and the economy, with Labour in office dispensing special favours to powerful but unaccountable trade union leaders.

Minkin offers a sturdy defence of the party-union linkage, denying that Labour's trade union origins obliged the party leaders, in opposition or office, to observe a parity of strategy and vision with their trade union counterparts. Interpreting the party's history in the context of Minkin's analysis strongly brings out this theme, that the political and industrial leaders of the 'labour movement' often pursued divergent aims, and that conflicts between the respective leaderships did arise which were often resolved in favour of the 'politicians'.

⁴Lewis Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance. Trade Unions and the Labour Party*.

⁵Ibid, p.xii

⁶Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*; John Saville, *The Labour Movement in Britain*.

ESTABLISHMENT OF SEPARATE SPHERES 1900-1940

Labour was established at the beginning of the twentieth century with credentials that set it apart from traditional Westminster political parties. Although formally a partnership between trade unions and a number of socialist political societies, the role of the unions was paramount; for the industrial organisations could offer the essential numerical and financial support which the ILP, the Fabians and the SDF simply could not. Moreover, the Labour Representation Committee's stated aim of securing independent parliamentary representation for the pursuit of 'trade union principles and ideals' was a specific commitment to the sectional interest of the organised working class. Minkin sharply observes that the nature of this genesis provided the labour movement with a wide range of familial and biological metaphors, perhaps the most remarkable being Ernest Bevin's characteristic remark that the party had been produced 'out of the bowels of the trade unions'.⁷

Bevin made this observation at the 1935 Labour Party Conference, by which time the original party-union relationship, and with it the nature of the Labour Party, had long undergone considerable changes. Lewis Minkin defines the sum of these changes as the establishment of a relationship between two separate but mutually compatible partners, each with their own recognisable and different interests and responsibilities. This is ascribed to a number of loosely related but mutually reinforcing factors, the most important being the movement's ideological unity. Both partners have shared a commitment to Parliamentary democracy, and also believed that the state was politically neutral and therefore of immense potential benefit to working people. From around 1900 unions provided the financial and numerical support which made the party viable, participated in the selection of its candidates and in the formulation of its policy, but made little attempt to interfere in the day to day running of the parliamentary organisation. Such abstention was encouraged as unions grew, through the First World War and after, and as the burdens of trade union leadership became more onerous. With a dwindling number of senior trade unionists on Labour's benches, the Parliamentary party became more diverse in its social composition, with an increasing number of professionals and non-trade-unionist intellectuals reinforcing the separation of the political and

⁷Quoted by Minkin, *op. cit.*, p.3.

the industrial. This diversity reflected the party's changing political identity. After 1922, when Labour's vote outstripped its affiliated union membership for the first time, the party was decreasingly dependent on the votes of trade union members and their families. As Minkin points out, these different bases of support required 'differing obligations and concerns' from the alliance's respective partners, with the party increasingly having to address the aspirations of those outside the organised industrial working class as it sought political power.⁸

This divergence did not, of course, imply division within the labour movement. Minkin contends that any tension between the industrial and political was defused by an informal system of rules which developed organically across the first three decades of the Party's existence. These 'rules' - never rigidly codified but implicitly recognised by the unions and the party nevertheless - were based on the core trade union values of freedom, unity and solidarity, and emphasised the partners' individual rights and collective obligations. 'Freedom' implied that in any dispute the union concerned was entitled to protect its members without interference from other unions or politicians; the unions' autonomous position in industrial matters was to be observed by the party, and in return the unions would be content to leave politics to the 'politicians'. 'Unity' and 'solidarity' - the watchwords of strength in the labour movement - required trade unions to marshal support behind the Parliamentary leadership, and in the stormy interwar years to protect the disappointing Labour Governments against criticism from the left.⁹

These values were determined by the historical essence of the TUC. Minkin argues that whilst generally adhering to a wide range of social, economic and political goals, the TUC has held a single over-riding priority at every stage of its development. This 'primary consideration' has been the 'defence of trade unionism', which usually involved a narrowly defined 'economist' strategy of seeking improved working conditions. However, when wider political developments interfered with this priority, the TUC was prepared to broaden its strategy. For instance, it was this 'principle of priority', as Minkin calls it, which had underpinned the TUC's support for the foundation of the party at Westminster. And in the 1930s it was the realisation that fascism directly threatened trade unionism which

⁸Ibid., pp.9-15.

⁹Ibid., pp.27-39.

motivated Bevin and Citrine in their successful efforts to commit the TUC, and in 1935 the Labour Party, to collective security and rearmament. This fundamental issue, trade union priority, is equally illustrated by Labour's experiences in office, in 1924 and from 1929-31, which offer interesting illustrations of the complex inter-play of forces within the alliance, highlighting the points of potential conflict as well as ultimate harmony between the two partners.

With the formation of the minority Labour administration on 21 January 1924, the potential for conflict between the political and industrial wings of the movement, implied by the increasing divergence of their respective core supports, was brought immediately to the fore. On 16 February the TGWU leader Ernest Bevin authorised a national dock strike by 110,000 workers in pursuit of a wage increase and a guaranteed working week. MacDonald's Government was greatly alarmed and responded by preparing to operate the 1920 Emergency Powers Act. With the threatened imposition of Lloyd George's strike-breaking legislation, Bevin called the strike off, having won the wage claim but on decasualisation having to accept the compromise of a Court of Inquiry. The following month, facing a strike by London tramway workers, the Government actually obtained the King's signature on another Emergency Powers Proclamation, although this stoppage was called off on the following day, 31 March. Bevin and other senior trade unionists were furious with the Government's actions, which flouted the freedom of workers to protect their individual liberties and rights via collective strike action, and apparently abused the very trade union autonomy which the Labour Party had been created to protect. The episode indicated that Labour Ministers were anxious both to convince middle class opinion that Labour in power would administer no special favours to its trade union allies and to notify the unions that their industrial interests would not interfere with Labour's obligations to the wider community, and the outcome was a sharpened division between the movement's separate industrial and political spheres. Responding to criticism that the TGWU strikes were jeopardising the first Labour Government and the future success of socialism, Ernest Bevin had denied that a 'policy of industrial truce' would benefit the administration:

There is work to do on the industrial field as well as in the political arena. While it is true that the two are to some extent part of the same effort, we must not lose sight of the fact that governments may come and

governments may go, but the workers' fight for the betterment of conditions must go on all the time.¹⁰

Bevin's pragmatic prescience was borne out by the subsequent five years of Conservative Government, with the TUC and the Labour Party engaged in visibly separate spheres of activity, most notably during the General Strike. This process was of course encouraged by the Conservatives' 'revenge' for the General Strike, the 1927 Trade Unions and Trade Disputes Act. In replacing the principle of contracting 'in' rather than contracting 'out', the legislation physically loosened the relationship between the Labour Party and the unions.

The relationship between the 1929 Labour Government and the trade unions further exemplified the governing 'rules' of behaviour and the strain which they could come under. TUC leaders, including left-wingers like the miners' secretary Arthur Cook, did much to deflect criticism of the minority administration's failure to attack unemployment and abolish the 1927 trade union legislation.¹¹ However, with Bevin increasingly concerned about the wisdom of the Government's priorities, as large-scale unemployment continued to undermine the size, strength and confidence of the labour movement, the TUC gradually withdrew its uncritical support from the administration. The 'principle of priority' duly pressed the TUC into action during the great crisis of August 1931, mobilising internal Cabinet opposition to the unemployment benefit cuts on 20 August 1931. The 'solidarity' of the alliance also ensured that the unions would provide what Bevin described as a 'ballast' role for the party. Labour's morale, which had been steadily eroding since 1929, was badly bruised by the Government's downfall, MacDonald's defection and the crushing electoral defeat which followed. In the face of this collapse the TUC brought comfort to the movement, acting decisively on two important questions: in insisting upon the expulsion of MacDonald and Snowden from the Labour Party on 28 September, and in opposing the National Government's record on unemployment after Labour's parliamentary strength had been reduced to just 46.

The unions' stabilising role at a moment of crisis was not, as Minkin records, 'without its clear quid pro quo'; and in the wake of 1931 a number

¹⁰Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin Volume I*, pp.243-4.

¹¹Paul Davies, *A.J. Cook*, pp.169-71.

of important new 'rules' defining the nature of the partnership in the unions' favour were established, the most pertinent being that the political leadership would never again commit itself to a governing coalition or political alliance without first seeking the movement's approval.¹² This realignment of forces within the partnership was commensurate with the TUC's new position as the alliance's senior figure, its relative industrial muscle compensating for Labour's political weakness. At the same time it represented affirmation of the unions' historical priorities and position as the party's anchor. On 10 November 1931 an inquest into the crisis was conducted at a joint meeting of the General Council and the NEC. In remarking upon the failure of the Government to consult the TUC at an earlier stage, Walter Citrine restated the origins and consequent obligations of the party:

They (the General Council) did not seek in any shape or form to say what the party was to do, but they did ask that the primary purpose of the creation of the party should not be forgotten. It was created by the Trade Union movement to do those things in Parliament which the Trade Union Movement found ineffectively performed by the two-party system.¹³

This restatement of the TUC 'principle of priority' was characteristic of the relationship between party and unions which had emerged since 1900, the partnership of two separate but highly compatible forces. During the interwar years the TUC's contribution had been vital, holding the alliance and the party together after 1931. This allowed the party time in which to recover, time in which it sought to entertain a broader community interest, within which the values and aspirations of trade unionism could be sustained. This search was given a tremendous fillip by the Second World War.

¹²Minkin, op. cit., pp.39-40.

¹³Walter Citrine quoted in V.L. Allen, *Trade Unions and the Government*; Allen also observes that at the joint meeting of the GC and the NEC on 10 November 1931, the General Council expressed its views 'no longer as a suppliant but as a representative of the principal partner in a weakened, shocked, though wiser labour movement', p.258.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In the twentieth century, according to one common view, war has been the great motor-force of economic, social and political change, accelerating and bringing to fruition deep-set historical trends. In Britain the Second World War certainly shifted the balance of political and industrial power in favour of the labour movement. There were a number of reasons for this. The political character of the war was undeniably confusing, as Ernest Mandel's Marxist account testifies, with a bewildering array of conflicting and arguably contradictory interests characterising the nations and colonies which stood together against Germany, Italy and Japan.¹⁴ Yet in Britain the dominant public theme was the stated need to defeat Nazi Germany. The democratic anti-fascist rhetoric and the common sacrifices that this venture entailed, promoted a much stronger sense of social cohesion than had been evident in interwar Britain. The rationing that brought 'fair shares' was apparent testimony to the organising powers of the community - a development and a belief further encouraged by the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union. With the Soviet Union's command economy sustaining a victorious military repulsion of the Nazi invasion, fresh credibility became attached to the notion of economic planning, but long before the Red Army's advance on Berlin began, large sections of the British public had begun to disassociate themselves from the Conservatives. The pre-war appeasers, the 'guilty men', had kept millions on the dole instead of rearming to resist Hitler and defeat fascism.¹⁵

These political and social developments were complemented in labour's favour by the shifting economic position of the working class. With manpower as the ultimate 'scarce resource' during the national emergency, and Ernest Bevin at the Ministry of Labour, the trade unions attained unprecedented political and economic power, and in the process grew in size and confidence. In July 1945 the Labour Party duly won a stunning victory in the General Election and the first majority Labour Government was formed. These were years, as Minkin puts it, of 'solid achievement',¹⁶ but Minkin also points out that the war revealed

¹⁴Ernest Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War*, especially pp.85-95.

¹⁵Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945*, especially pp.127-64; Angus Calder, *The People's War*, p.158.

¹⁶Minkin, op. cit., p.54.

considerable tensions within the labour alliance, with the informal rules which underwrote its existence being called into question along with many other political, economic and social relationships during the peculiar conditions of total war. These tensions revealed some of the potential conflicts which would inform the partners' relationship after July 1945.

The TUC had reordered its priorities in accordance with the new situation of Labour serving in the Coalition. With Bevin at the Ministry of Labour, union leaders gladly contributed to the war effort, making concessions on dilution and industrial conscription. Most notably, they accepted the 1940 emergency regulation, Conditions of Employment and Compulsory Arbitration (or Order 1305 as it was more commonly referred to), and its 1944 punitive amendment, Regulation 1AA. These outlawed the right to strike. Regulation 1AA carried as punishment for inciting strike action in an essential service five years' penal servitude and/or a £500 fine; but the TUC accepted the order, and made a number of short-term concessions on industrial production during the national emergency, in which the future of the British working class as much as the British Empire was at stake. These were the very terms with which Bevin justified Regulation 1AA. He indicated in the House of Commons that all sectional claims and interests were subordinate to the task of national military victory, and restated an Anglo-centric trade unionist position on the anti-Nazi struggle:

When Fascism and Nazism had to be really faced in England - and this is a justification for the National Government - we, at least, did not pick one class to face it as they did in poor Austria; we have stood as a nation against the vile thing. Let us stand united until it is defeated.¹⁷

Such TUC concessions were, of course, rewarded with considerable privileges in return. As Minister of Labour Ernest Bevin presided over a reformist regime that inflated industrial morale and maximised productivity by improving working conditions and the social status of working people. To this end measures such as the 1943 Catering Wages Act, the 1944 Disabled Persons Act and the 1945 Wages Councils Act were brought forward. Reform also encompassed the partial decasualisation of labour in the dock industry. This was something to which Bevin had long been personally committed, and the industry's casual regime was

¹⁷*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.399, 1131, 28 April 1944.

particularly ill-suited to the requirements of war.¹⁸ Moreover, with manpower defined by Bevin as the single most valuable industrial commodity - and accepted as such by his War Cabinet colleagues - the role of the trade unions, as organisers of this manpower, was recognised as indispensable in planning and rallying support for industrial strategy. Minkin points out that the TUC's historic claim 'to represent the working people in all matters affecting their conditions of life and labour' was now formally conceded,¹⁹ along with the principle of equal status in a tripartite system of collective bargaining.²⁰

This enhancement of the TUC's status led to considerable tension within the labour alliance. The pragmatism of the TUC leaders and their determination at all times to secure the 'best available outcome' for trade union members has been noted. As trade unionists had benefited from their experiences under the wartime coalition, and with Labour's industrial and political leaders not expecting in 1943 to defeat the wartime hero Churchill in a post-war election, for trade unionists the 'best available outcome' would be the maintenance of the coalition after the war. Bevin himself clearly believed that he might continue to serve in peace-time as Minister of Labour under Churchill.²¹ Minkin believes that this line of reasoning might have persuaded Bevin that the TUC could represent a political *alternative* to the Labour Party, given its access to Government, its representation in Cabinet and the clear gains which the direct relationship had won.²² Certainly Bevin was highly ambivalent about his relations with the party. Angered by back-bench criticism during the Beveridge Report debate in February 1943, he withdrew from party activities altogether, attending neither PLP meetings nor the 1943 Party Conference. Disparaging the purpose of 'playing the party game' he only returned in order to press his position on Regulation 1AA on the PLP in April 1944. Throughout the war Bevin plainly shared the premier's belief that he was

¹⁸V.L. Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*, pp.172-7; Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin Volume II Minister of Labour 1940-45*, pp.58-9; Minkin, op. cit., p. 57; Gordon Phillips and Noel Whiteside, *Casual Labour. The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry*, p.225.

¹⁹Minkin, op. cit., p.57.

²⁰Keith Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society*, pp. 271-7.

²¹Addison, op. cit., p.234.

²²Minkin, op. cit., p.60.

in the War Cabinet to represent the trade unions and not the Labour Party.²³

This process greatly antagonised the Labour left. Aneurin Bevan felt that in strengthening the state's coercive powers against striking workers and apparently entertaining the idea of a peace-time Coalition, Bevin was endangering the Labour Party's long-term future.²⁴ Given Bevin's evident ambivalence towards the Labour Party in 1943 and 1944, this fear was not completely unfounded. Indeed it was further grounded on the legal action which had been taken by the authorities against striking workers since the imposition of the Emergency Regulations in 1940 - most notably against 1000 coal miners at Betteshanger Colliery in Kent in 1942 - and the strengthening of the Government's emergency powers with the amended Regulation 1AA in 1944.

On the latter initiative Bevan and other leftist critics were as much dismayed by the manner and reasoning that surrounded its implementation as the regulation's draconian provisions themselves. The crucible of industrial conflict in 1944 was the coal-mining industry, with 1.85 million days lost to strike action between 28 January and 11 April. Implying that strikes were being fomented by 'Trotskyites' and other 'anti-war people' intent on disrupting the allies' invasion preparations, Bevin secured the agreement of the TUC and employers on 11 April for Regulation 1AA without referring the matter to Parliament. In the House of Commons Bevan attacked Bevin for by-passing Parliamentary democracy in this way, an action representing 'the enfranchisement of the corporate society and the disfranchisement of the individual'.²⁵ In the same debate the

Common Wealth MP, Sir Richard Acland, ridiculed Bevin's implication that the miners' action had been underwritten by political subversion. The Trotskyist organisation concerned had a membership of 500, a fortnightly paper with a circulation of less than 5,000, and a head office with weekly expenses - including wages - of £10: it could not possibly have nurtured a strike involving tens of thousands of miners.²⁶

²³Bullock, V.II, 230-4.

²⁴Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan 1898-1945*, pp.460-1.

²⁵*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 399, 1072, 28 April 1944.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 1144. The organisation concerned was the Revolutionary Communist Party, product in February 1944 of a merger between the Workers' International League and the Revolutionary Socialist League - the latter recognised by the Fourth International since 1939. A historian of the far left in Britain, John Callaghan, notes that in 1944 the RCP's membership

This conflict did not, of course, lead to the TUC abandoning the party: the values of loyalty and solidarity were too ingrained, the respect for majority decision absolute. Bevin duly conceded to the demand expressed at the December 1944 Party Conference, that Labour fight the 1945 General Election independently. Any trade union misgivings about abandoning the coalition might have been assuaged by the sentiment which Bevin himself had expressed in 1924, when accused of jeopardising the first Labour Government: whilst governments would come and go, the struggle for improved workers' conditions would not. This struggle had certainly been hindered by the Conservative and National Governments between the wars, but the unions had prospered nevertheless. Clearly the election of a majority Labour administration would be richly preferable, but with the new strength and confidence engendered by the war years the unions did not question their ability to survive further periods of Conservative Government.

THE NEW SITUATION

The strong current of Labour's history towards the cultivation of a national rather than a sectional identity, had been greatly underestimated by *The Times* leader which greeted the arrival of Labour in office on 27 July 1945. It was a theme restated by Clement Attlee during the election campaign. In response to Churchill's notorious 'Gestapo' speech, which had equated democratic socialism with Nazism, Attlee characterised Labour as the natural party of Government in Britain:

The Conservative Party remains a class Party. In twenty years in the House of Commons I cannot recall more than half a dozen from the ranks of the wage earners. It represents today, as in the past, the forces of property and privilege. The Labour Party is, in fact, the one Party which most reflects in its representation and composition all the main streams which flow into the river of our national life.²⁷

The Parliamentary Labour Party which assembled to hear the King's Speech on 15 August reflected this diversity and apparently indicated that

was only 400, and that a number of its members believed the appellation 'Party' to be ludicrous for such a small organisation; *British Trotskyism*, pp.27-9.

²⁷ Attlee's broadcast was on 5 June 1945; quoted in Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, pp.256-7.

as Labour's electoral support grew, so its dependence on trade union and manual working class candidates and support diminished. Of the 393 members 259 were new to the House; the 119 trade union sponsored members constituted 31 per cent of the total, as opposed to 51 per cent in 1935 and 76 per cent after the 1931 catastrophe.²⁸ On the same theme Margaret Cole estimated on behalf of the Fabian Society that around 150 Labour MPs came from manual working class occupations; of the numerous professional groups present in the PLP there were now 49 university lecturers or school teachers, 44 lawyers, 25 journalists, 15 doctors and, in the party opposed to the Conservatives' 'property and privilege' there was even room for 25 company directors.²⁹ Given Labour's reliance on miners in the 1931 Parliament, for Minkin the most telling of these statistics was that ex-teachers now exceeded ex-miners in the Westminster ranks.³⁰ One former schoolmaster, the new Home Secretary Chuter Ede, was greatly pleased at this transformation in the PLP's character. On 28 July he noted in his diary that 'the new Party is a great change from the old. It teems with bright, vivacious servicemen. The superannuated Trade Union official seems hardly to be noticeable in the ranks.'³¹

Whilst the proportion of trade unionists was down compared with the previous Parliament, Attlee acknowledged the tensions that had arisen in 1924 and 1931 within the alliance by installing a greater share of former trade unionists in his Cabinet than in previous Labour Governments. He took great care, he told his press secretary Francis Williams, to balance 'intelligentsia' with trade unionists. Thus nine of his twenty Cabinet Ministers were trade unionists.³²

The 'mixed constitution' of the Cabinet and Labour's victory at the polls restored the equilibrium of the labour alliance which had been disturbed during the war. With the great lynchpin of the trade union movement, Ernie Bevin, centrally positioned within a majority Labour Government, and the channels of communication between the movement's industrial and political leaderships open as never before, the unions were

²⁸Henry Pelling, *The Labour Governments 1945-51*, p.43.

²⁹Margaret Cole's Fabian estimates taken from Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power*, p.60.

³⁰Minkin, op. cit., p.71.

³¹Kevin Jefferys (ed.), *Labour and the Wartime Coalition. From the Diary of James Chuter Ede 1941-1945*, p.229.

³²Francis Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers*, p.84.

again willing to devolve 'political' responsibility upon the politicians. There was no doubting the joy with which union leaders greeted the result. In the *Transport and General Workers' Record*, Acting General Secretary Arthur Deakin heralded the arrival of the 'great day which the pioneers of our Movement could see only in their dreams'.³³

This restoration of good will between the party and the unions would prove to be of immeasurable importance to the Government. Ostensibly an entirely new situation had been created by the electoral verdict, presenting Labour with unprecedented power and opportunity. Without the need to co-opt Liberal support, which had trammelled previous Labour administrations, the huge majority allowed Attlee's Government to press on with its manifesto commitments. Indeed the two or three years which followed July 1945 was a period of considerable achievement. Amidst a flurry of administrative and legislative activity, a number of interwar labour movement demons were exorcised: the 1927 Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act was repealed, and the Coal Mining Industry and the Bank of England nationalised, along with the railways and the water, gas and electricity services. A comprehensive system of social insurance was put into place; and the greatest post-war Labour totem of all, Aneurin Bevan's National Health Service, was erected on 5 July 1948.

Nonetheless, there were two central problems which the Government could not legislate away. The war which had been central to Labour's victory also bequeathed the new administration two huge dilemmas: a troubling economic perspective and the question of the post-war international settlement. The latter proved to be particularly problematic as the tensions of the Cold War gathered and intensified, with the quest for agreement between Britain, the USA and the USSR complicated by the other urgent matter of restoring Europe's shattered economy. In seeking a way out of these dilemmas the Labour Government saw fit to enlist help from outwith the Parliamentary Labour Party, with secret cross-party discussions on foreign affairs often conducted between the old war-time comrades Attlee, Bevin, Churchill and Eden.³⁴ Perhaps of greater significance, however, was the contribution of the TUC in marshalling support for the Government's economic and international strategies.

³³*Transport and General Workers' Record*, August 1945.

³⁴Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin Foreign Secretary 1945-51*, p.98.

ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

Authoritative published sources estimate that Britain lost approximately one quarter of its national wealth during the Second World War. This damage was largely due to the heavy loss of earnings on both visible and invisible trade. Owing to the needs of war mobilisation, export industries were deliberately run down after 1939, so that in 1945 manufacturing exports were 30 per cent of their 1938 level. This deficiency was exacerbated by the significant diminution of Britain's invisible exports, a traditionally valuable source of national income. In terms of shipping tonnage the net loss arising from the war was 28 per cent; foreign assets had also been lost, the earnings on which had been equivalent to the sum typically spent on around one quarter of the nation's imports. Collectively these circumstances confronted the country with a trade deficit which would only be balanced, and imports of food and raw materials restored to pre-war levels, if Britain could increase its exports to between 50-75 per cent above the 1938 figure.³⁵

These difficulties were severely compounded by the American decision to terminate the Lend-Lease arrangements by which Britain had been meeting its import expenses. Truman's somewhat precipitate action, which came on 21 August only six days after V-J Day, left Britain with no alternative other than to negotiate a new loan agreement with the USA in order to finance its external deficit and maintain the livelihood of the nation. Such an agreement, with Keynes operating on the Government's behalf, was duly negotiated and signed, largely on American terms, in Washington DC on 6 December.

This extremely grim perspective did not, however, greatly deflect the Government during its first year in office. Optimism naturally flowed from the spectacular electoral victory, and in office Labour was buoyed by its initial legislative achievements and the exuberance of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton. Dalton introduced his first Budget, in November 1945 - when the Washington Loan negotiations were still unresolved - with, he told the House of Commons, 'a song in my heart'.³⁶ The Chancellor continued to go cheerfully about his business throughout

³⁵Alec Cairncross, *Years of Recovery*, pp.6-9.

³⁶Quoted in Peter Hennessy, *Never Again. Britain 1945-1951*, p.90.

1946. With the maintenance of rationing and a general shortage of consumer demand, exports boomed. In November they reached 111 per cent of the 1938 total, prompting Dalton to rashly predict: 'If we keep going together as we have since V-J Day, the shortages and frustrations which still afflict us will disappear like the snows of winter, and give place to the full promise of springtime.'³⁷

The following year, 1947, saw an enormous change in Britain's economic fortunes and, for the Government, according to Kenneth O. Morgan, it was 'a year of almost unrelieved disaster'.³⁸ An immensely harsh winter maximised the effects of a coal crisis which caused massive short-term disruption to industrial activity, with two million workers temporarily unemployed.³⁹ This was succeeded by an even more damaging summer financial storm, and in October the optimistic Dalton - the song extinguished from his heart - gave way to Sir Stafford Cripps - the harbinger of austerity - at the Treasury. The symbolism of the switch in personnel can perhaps be overstated. It had, after all, been Dalton who had initially recognised Britain's contracting global capacity and forced the issue of withdrawing economic aid to Greece and Turkey in February 1947.⁴⁰ Moreover, whilst Peter Hennessy states that no Chancellor 'before or since' Dalton 'has been such a soft touch for social-spending ministers',⁴¹ Cripps did not appreciably reverse the social welfare progress which Dalton had financed. Nevertheless, from the autumn of 1947 the Government re-emphasised that recovery was contingent upon restricting imports and expanding exports - a conjunction requiring a great deal of public co-operation and restraint. With Cripps, for Kenneth O. Morgan the embodiment of 'a new morality and sense of public rectitude',⁴² as Chancellor, the Government was plainly better equipped to appeal for such popular support than when served by the less prudent figure of Dalton.

The apparent recovery in 1946 had masked the precarious nature of Britain's post-war economic life, for despite the boom in exports, the balance of payments deficit was still £344 million.⁴³ This fragility was

³⁷Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.214.

³⁸Morgan, *op.cit.*, p.331.

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp.331-33.

⁴⁰Hennessy, *op.cit.*, p.93.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour People*, p.164.

⁴³Hennessy, *op.cit.*, p.214.

exacerbated by the Anglo-American economic relationship's disequilibrium. Generally speaking, to pay for vital US imports Britain used up dollars which it could not recoup, as the bulk of British export markets lay outside the dollar trading area.⁴⁴ British weakness was illustrated during the summer of 1947, as the 1945 loan rapidly ebbed away. With uncertainty surrounding the outcome of Anglo-American negotiations on US Secretary of State Marshall's proposals for a European Recovery Programme, the British Treasury prepared a series of austerity measures. These are discussed by Peter Hennessy in his recent study of Attlee's Britain, which attaches particular importance to a Treasury document drawn up by Otto Clarke, 'Marshall Proposals. Alternative Action in event of breakdown'. Clarke, lately described by his then colleague Alec Cairncross as the only Treasury official with 'any real flair for general economic policy',⁴⁵ stated in his memorandum that without American aid Britain would have 'to ride the storm with lower imports', but in order to maintain public morale a programme for independent recovery by 1950 would have to be put in place. This would necessitate a 'famine' food plan with compulsory direction of labour to agriculture over the next three years, and a drastically reduced building programme to save timber, steel and manpower for export requirements. With no further dollars, elsewhere in Whitehall it was estimated that the daily ration would be reduced to 1,700 calories - 1,000 less than the wartime minimum.⁴⁶

This difficulty was cruelly exacerbated by the commencement of sterling convertibility, in accordance with the 1945 loan agreement, on 15 July 1947. A spectacular run on the pound ensued, forcing the Government to suspend convertibility on 21 August. Cairncross notes that the outflow of dollars and gold in 1947 increased fourfold on 1946, \$4,100 million as opposed to \$900 million.⁴⁷ In the Cabinet meeting which decided in favour of suspension on 17 August, Chancellor Dalton noted that on 11 August alone, \$150 million had been lost.⁴⁸

After Cripps became Chancellor on 13 November 1947, Britain's economic recovery was essentially based on producing enough exports to

⁴⁴Cairncross, *op.cit.*, p.65.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p.55.

⁴⁶Hennessy, *op. cit.*, pp.300-2.

⁴⁷Cairncross, *op. cit.*, p.121.

⁴⁸PRO: CAB 128 CM(47)71, 17 August 1947. The departmental locations of the acronyms attached to the PRO sources are provided separately.

earn the dollars required to maintain imports of food and the raw materials which were necessary for the maintenance of full employment. This strategy duly placed fresh demands not only on British manufacturing industries, but also on the nation's docks through which these exports and imports had, of necessity, to pass. The strains which this strategy induced are explored in the bulk of this thesis, which explores the Government's reaction to the unofficial dock strikes which disrupted British economic life after 1945.

Broadly speaking, the Government's long-term economic strategy was largely successful however, being prosecuted with indispensable support from two sources. Of primary assistance was the US Treasury, which provided Britain with many of the dollars for which it was desperate. However, in minimising the costs of the export drive the Attlee Government enjoyed immensely significant help from its labour alliance partner, the TUC.

The Government expended a great deal of diplomatic activity in smoothing relations with the USA after the abandonment of convertibility in August 1947, which formally contravened the 1945 agreement. However, the US administration could not afford to be too impatient. International tension sharpened considerably in 1947, and the view crystallised in Washington that the best insurance against communist ascendancy in Western Europe would be for the United States to guarantee financially the continent's economic recovery. This perception was given fresh credence by the communist coup in Czechoslovakia, with the passage of Truman's Economic Cooperation Act through the Senate on 13 March 1948 only days after news of the death of Jan Masaryk, Czechoslovakia's anti-communist and Anglophile Foreign Secretary, in mysterious circumstances in Prague.⁴⁹

Otto Clarke's worst-case scenario was duly avoided, with President Truman signing the Economic Co-operation Bill that would guarantee European recovery on 3 April 1948. This provided the dollars which formed a basis for British recovery until the end of 1950. On 25 June the first meeting between British and American officials on the European Recovery Programme took place, Leslie Rowan of the British Committee for European

⁴⁹Henry Pelling, *Britain and the Marshall Plan*, p.25; recent research suggests that Masaryk was murdered by a NKVD-trained Sudetan Czech, Major Augustin Sram, Robin Bruce Lockhart, 'Who Killed Jan Masaryk?', *History Today*, September 1992.

Economic Cooperation welcoming Thomas K. Finletter, Chief of the US European Cooperation Act mission in London, to the Treasury.

The British and the US Treasuries maintained close contact throughout the European Recovery Programme's 1948-50 period, most notably during the 1949 financial crisis, when the post-1947 economic advance was temporarily halted by a depression in export markets. This reinflated Britain's gold/dollar and trade deficits, precipitating another exchange crisis and, eventually, led to the devaluation of sterling from \$4.03 to \$2.80 in September. In July US Treasury Secretary John Snyder held talks in London with Cripps on the disequilibrium between the dollar and sterling areas, and on 31 August Bevin and Cripps set out across the Atlantic to inform the US Government of the Cabinet decision to devalue which had been taken two days previously.⁵⁰ These talks, held in Washington, and the devaluation itself, diminished the disequilibrium between the dollar and sterling areas, and led to a remarkable reversal in Britain's economic fortunes. In 1947 the gold and dollar deficit totalled £1,024 million, and the current account deficit £381 million. Through a shift in the pattern of external trade, with less imports from and more exports to North America, and through attaining the necessary increase in overall export activity, up to 80 per cent in excess of the 1938 level, by 1950 the Government had converted these deficits into substantial surpluses: £308 million and £307 million with respective regard to gold/dollars and the current account. These restored balances enabled Britain to opt out of Marshall Aid at the end of 1950, two years earlier than planned.⁵¹

Whilst US finance was clearly instrumental to this recovery, throughout the vital period of Marshall Aid the Labour Government also enjoyed crucial support from the Trades Union Congress in pursuing its anti-inflation, export-driven recovery programme.

During Dalton's Chancellorship, the TUC's economic behaviour had hardly deviated since its response to the wartime coalition's 1944 White Paper on Employment. This had been to state that the responsibility for maintaining employment belonged to the Government, which should seek no sacrifices from trade unionists in pursuing this duty. A TUC 'Interim Report on Post-War Reconstruction' duly insisted that 'the TUC would have

⁵⁰Bullock, *Ernest Bevin Foreign Secretary 1945-51*, pp.706-10 and 716-7; Pelling, *Marshall Plan*, pp. 81-85.

⁵¹Bullock, *Foreign Secretary*, p.718; Cairncross, *op.cit.*, pp.66-86.

at all times to consider whether it was, on balance, better that the objective [of full employment] should be modified rather than that methods incompatible with the rights of work people and the objectives of Trade Unionism should be used to achieve it.⁵²

Even after the election of a Labour administration, the TUC remained cautious about abandoning its traditional functions and accepting new obligations. The TUC was a member of the tripartite National Joint Advisory Council, but Russell Jones has justly characterised this as solely an 'educative forum'.⁵³ Indeed, prior to 1948 it is difficult to identify the type of mechanical links between the TUC and the state - implied, for instance, in Keith Middlemas's corporate triangle of union leaders, employers' representatives and Whitehall bureaucrats⁵⁴ - which would have allowed the unions to directly influence Government policy. Certainly union leaders supported the efforts of their labour movement partners, but links were through the party rather than Whitehall, and union leaders' efforts in this direction were largely confined to reminding members that the economic situation was extremely serious. In September 1945, for instance, Arthur Deakin told readers of the Transport Workers' journal that: 'Without a flourishing export trade it will be impossible for the people of this country to raise their own standard of living and at the same time make their full contribution in co-operation with other nations in the effort to raise working class living standards throughout the world.'⁵⁵

Such exhortations were undoubtedly significant, but the TUC's central contribution to economic recovery came after the 1947 convertibility crisis. In November 1947 Cripps informed Cabinet that a successful export drive would only be obtained if accompanied by effective wage and price restraint. With a minimum of goods and services available on the market, general increases in money wages could not be justified. A wider availability of goods and services would not result, but a build up of inflationary pressure would take place, further jeopardising Britain's external deficit as the money cost of exports rose and their marketable value duly declined. Although it was not the Government's place to

⁵²Quoted in Russell Jones, *Wages and Employment Policy 1936-1985*, p.30.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p.35.

⁵⁴Middlemas, *op.cit.*

⁵⁵*Transport and General Workers' Record*, September 1945.

intervene directly in fixing individual incomes, it was essential that firm guidelines be laid down for those to whom this duty did fall.⁵⁶

The TUC were informed of this developing strategy at a meeting with Attlee on 17 November.⁵⁷ The General Council responded towards the end of 1947 with an 'Interim Report on the Economic Situation'. This conceded the potential need for restraint, but insisted upon the unions' prerogative to police any regulations that were introduced: 'any attempt on the part of an outside body to regulate or directly control wage movements would have disastrous effects ... if there was to be greater restraint upon wage movements it could come only from within the trade union movement itself.'⁵⁸

In February 1948 the Government issued a *Statement on Personal Incomes, Costs and Prices*, which brought the essence of Cripps's argument for an incomes standstill into the public sphere.⁵⁹ The TUC were provided with sufficient reassurances concerning the Government's determination to restrict prices and profits and the voluntary nature of the standstill, and a special conference of trade union executive councils on 24 March took the unprecedented step of accepting, by over three million votes, a pay freeze in peace-time.

The TUC's co-operation over the White Paper on incomes lasted until September 1950 and, as separate accounts by Alec Cairncross and Russell Jones testify, was of immense benefit to the Government.⁶⁰ Between June 1945 and March 1948 wages advanced by 8-10 per cent. In the eighteen months from March 1948 the increase was only 3 per cent. After the further shattering of ministerial confidence which devaluation represented in September 1949,⁶¹ the TUC position on wages became even more important. On 23 November the General Council recommended an extension of the freeze, and agreements that pegged wages to the cost of living were suspended, on the condition that the retail price index did not rise above 5 per cent. In the twelve months from September 1949 money

⁵⁶PRO: CAB 129/CP(47)303, 13 November 1947.

⁵⁷PRO: CAB 128/CM(47)87, 13 November 1947.

⁵⁸TUC 'Interim Report on the Economic Situation', 1947, quoted in Jones, *op.cit.*, p.154.

⁵⁹*Statement on Personal Incomes, Prices and Profits* (Cmd. 7321 February 1948).

⁶⁰Cairncross, *op. cit.*, pp.405-6; Jones, *op. cit.*, pp.43-4.

⁶¹Pimlott, *op.cit.*, p. 146.

wages increased by 1.4 per cent, and with retail prices rising by 3 per cent real wages were stationary or falling. This was all the more remarkable when unemployment was below 300,000, with Cairncross and Jones both noting that hourly wage rates increased from March 1948 no more rapidly than between 1934 and 1938, when 2 million workers were unemployed.⁶² These wage and price movements were complemented by the notable labour productivity improvements which the TUC had overseen: up by 1.6 per cent per annum from 1945-51; by 2.5 per cent per annum from 1948-51 and by 3.5 per cent per annum in the crucial manufacturing sector in these last three years.⁶³

It is worth re-emphasising that the TUC's more active economic role from 1948-50, which contributed to the remarkable turn-round in Britain's economic fortunes during these years, considerably qualified its traditional responsibilities and functions. Trade Union leaders - most notably in the docks - paid for this departure in terms of growing rank and file dissatisfaction and unofficial industrial activity. Yet, in marshalling mass support behind the Government's economic strategy, they were steadily affirming the labour alliance 'rules' of behaviour. To recap, these required union leaders to show, when required, 'solidarity' with their political comrades, whilst at the same time ensuring the 'best available outcome' for their members. The timing of the new departure was highly significant. Before February 1948 the TUC was a relatively inactive economic and political player, content to watch the Government build upon the the great economic and social gains which the organised working class had made since 1940. By the middle of 1947, as Ben Pimlott has recently noted, the Government's main legislative work 'had been achieved, or was in train'.⁶⁴ This progress would now stand or fall on the basis of the Government's subsequent economic record - a perspective which may have contributed to the ascendancy of Morrisonian 'consolidation' in the spring of 1948. With the Labour Government weakening before international economic pressure, the TUC once again - as in 1931 - offered itself as 'ballast' to the party. By hardening their position on wages after devaluation, TUC leaders reinforced their determination to defend Labour comrades in office. Arthur Deakin, Bevin's successor as the TGWU's General Secretary and the

⁶²Cairncross, *op. cit.*, pp.405-6; Jones, *op. cit.*, pp.43-4.

⁶³Cairncross, *op. cit.*, pp.18-19.

⁶⁴Pimlott, *op. cit.*, p.102.

dominant TUC figure by the beginning of 1948, encapsulated the industrial leadership's unwavering loyalty to the political leadership. Deakin's biographer, Victor Allen, emphasises the extent of Deakin's determination to support the Government, with the General Secretary fully prepared to jeopardise his own authority amongst his members:

He possessed a deep loyalty to the labour movement which was epitomised for him by the Labour Government. In his eagerness to support the Government he stifled much useful criticism of its activities, for he disliked anything which could be misconstrued by the general public or used for political purposes. He was more than an advocate. As far as he could he applied the policy of wage restraint in his own union and incurred the displeasure of some of his more militant members. At times he risked the unity of his organisation and faced large-scale unofficial strikes rather than make expedient concessions. No Government could have had a more loyal supporter.⁶⁵

In abandoning its traditional pursuit of seeking an advance in wage labour's monetary value, the TUC reordered its priorities to secure the best bargain for its members. Counter-inflationary mechanisms were essential lest working class living standards be blown away in a whirlwind of rising prices and incomes. There was the fear that without TUC assistance the economy, and with it the Labour Government, would collapse. The General Council was immensely anxious to avoid this, for by the end of 1947 it was clear that the Labour Government had hugely benefited the unions and the working class. The repeal of the hostile 1927 legislation, the consultative avenues to Whitehall, the limited nationalisation package, the wider social and welfare benefits and, perhaps most valued of all, the maintenance of full employment, represented a position of considerable material advance since 1945.⁶⁶ The hard and practical heads of the TUC were more than willing to concede their privileges on wages and productivity in order to defend these more profound advantages.

⁶⁵ V.L. Allen, 'Arthur Deakin (1890-1955)'; *Dictionary of National Biography 1951-60*. See also Deakin's entry in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* III, 112-7, written by David E. Martin and Bryan Sadler. I adopt the custom hereafter of providing brief bibliographical references or notes for the less celebrated characters who are central to the developments under discussion.

⁶⁶ For instance, Modern Records Centre (hereafter MRC)/MSS.126/T&G/1/4/13, Chairman Edgar Fryer's Address to the TGWU Biennial Delegate Conference, 11 July 1949.

The Labour Governments' economic strategy for recovery, based on promoting exports with the assistance of Marshall dollars and TUC-policed wage moderation, had largely worked the trick by the end of 1950. Labour's final year in office was characterised, however, by a much deteriorating economic perspective. This decline arose from the outbreak of hostilities in Korea in June 1950. Under immense pressure from the United States, the Government responded by adopting a massive rearmaments programme. The package, enshrined in Hugh Gaitskell's controversial first - and only - budget in the spring of 1951, cost £4,700 million over three years,⁶⁷ and dramatically reversed Britain's economic progress. By the end of 1951 Britain's trade and gold/dollar imbalances were again soaring,⁶⁸ and in 1952 the Churchill administration decided to phase the defence estimates in over four years rather than three.⁶⁹

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Long before the outbreak of war in Korea these two aspects of political discourse, economic renewal and international friction, had intersected in Attlee's Britain; the growth of ideological conflict, particularly from 1947, constituted a definite framework within which Britain sought to rebuild its own and the wider European economy with US dollars. Ernest Bevin and Dean Acheson, his favourite US counterpart, shared an appreciation, albeit from slightly different ideological perspectives, that communism would best be resisted in Western Europe by a dual strategy. The first requirement was to rebuild economic life and so restore popular faith in the political and market institutions of liberal democracy. The second requirement was the political will and military capacity to defend liberal democracy and allow it the opportunity to flourish. Bevin and his American allies believed that it was in the political interests of communism for economic recovery to be delayed; and from this assumption it was readily concluded that communists were the active enemies of recovery, and were saboteurs or 'wreckers', concerned with promoting the economic dislocation that would act as fertile ground for communism. This belief was naturally to chequer Bevin's view of unofficial strike action in the British docks.

⁶⁷Morgan, *Labour People*, p.224.

⁶⁸Cairncross, *op. cit.*, p.154.

⁶⁹Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace*, pp.126-7.

Fittingly enough, then, Bevin's assessment of communism's disruptive nature was initially derived from his long trade union career. In accordance with trade union values of democracy and loyalty, Bevin cherished majority decisions and vilified those who refused to observe them: the communist-instigated National Minority Movement's 'fractional' industrial activity in the 1920s and 1930s had duly inspired his loathing. However, in the protracted sessions of the Council for Foreign Ministers which, mostly fruitlessly, sought to settle the array of international questions arising out of the war, Bevin found intransigent Soviet diplomats less easy to deal with than recalcitrant London busmen or Glaswegian dock workers. This exhausting round of talks and negotiations consumed a total of about eight working months, starting in London in September 1945 and closing without resolution in Paris in June 1949. The gloominess of these gatherings was punctuated by a number of rather more remarkable, if no less depressing developments.

The attention of students of Cold War history is generally drawn to Churchill's 'iron curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri on 5 February 1946. However, Victor Rothwell has asserted that the Foreign Office majority did not regard Churchill's remarks favourably, seeing them as 'premature'.⁷⁰ It is of much greater ideological interest, therefore, to consider the developments which marked the emergence of two potentially irreconcilable power blocs in 1947. In the spring of 1947 Britain's economic weaknesses forced the abandonment of its military commitments in Greece and Turkey, the primary purpose of which since at least 1944 had been to forestall partisan Communist movements. Determined that communism would not go unchallenged on the Aegean, Bevin asked the US Government to assume Britain's obligations in the area. This offer was famously taken up in Truman's speech to both Houses of Congress on 12 March. The 'Truman Doctrine', as the President's restatement of US foreign policy principles became known, established a formal commitment to the global containment of communism. The USA he cast as the guardian of all 'free peoples' who were seeking to choose between the two 'alternative ways of life': one being based on 'the will of the majority', and the other 'upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority'.⁷¹

⁷⁰Victor Rothwell, *Britain and the Cold War 1941-47*, p.260.

⁷¹Bullock, *Foreign Secretary*, p.368-70.

These comments were made on the same day that a session of the Council of Foreign Ministers opened in Moscow, but Bullock notes that the talks were not derailed as a result. However, the President's open statement that the world now consisted of two competing and ultimately irreconcilable political systems certainly informed the inflammatory Soviet response to the Marshall initiative. Speaking on 5 June at Harvard University, the Secretary of State gave economic substance to Truman's political observations in March, announcing that the US was prepared to underwrite a comprehensive recovery programme for Europe.⁷² On 25 June *Pravda* announced that the programme was 'apparently intended to solve the American export problem' and, if American involvement in Greece and Turkey was anything to go by, it would 'amount to interference in the internal affairs of European states and an infringement of their sovereignty'.⁷³

It is clear that the US offered Marshall Aid to the USSR in the understanding that it would be rejected. As Peter Hennessy has shown, Stalin and Molotov knew that if the US was able to finance an economic renaissance in Europe, Soviet economic and political domination in Eastern Europe would be over.⁷⁴ When European representatives, including Molotov, met to discuss their response to the Marshall offer in Paris on 27 June, Bevin and Georges Bidault, the French Foreign Secretary, were both keen to play down their opposition to Soviet participation. Bevin was anxious not to attract the charge of precipitating an anti-Soviet bloc; whilst Bidault was preoccupied with the Parti Communiste Francais's status as the largest single grouping in the National Assembly, and the growing industrial conflict which the PCF was exploiting if not promoting.⁷⁵ Yet privately Bevin and Bidault believed that Soviet participation in the programme would further obstruct the economic restoration of Europe. They were both relieved, therefore, when Molotov abandoned the talks on 2 July, repeating *Pravda's* charges that the programme would constitute unwarranted interference in European political and economic life. The

⁷²Ibid., p.404.

⁷³*Pravda*, 25 June 1947, quoted in Pelling, *Marshall Plan*, p.13.

⁷⁴Hennessy, op.cit., p.294. Hennessy cites the private papers of the senior State Department strategist, George Kennan, as well as the official State Department archive; also Rothwell, op.cit., p.284.

⁷⁵M. Adereth, *The French Communist Party*, pp.145-54; Pelling, *Marshall Plan*, p.11.

implications of the Soviet walk-out were immediately evident, possibly because they had been anticipated: 'This really is the birth of the Western bloc', whispered Bevin to his senior official Piers Dixon,⁷⁶ and the blame for splitting Europe and the world down the middle could now be attached to Stalin. A turning point, not just in terms of Britain's economic recovery, but in the development of the Cold War, had been reached.⁷⁷

The Soviet bloc's formal riposte came in September, with the establishment in Warsaw of the Communist Bureau of Information and Propaganda, or Cominform. Comprising the seven ruling parties in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Rumania, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia plus the French and Italian parties, the new international was activated by Stalin to unify communist activity in Eastern Europe and wring a fresh policy twist from communists in Western Europe. Delivering the Cominform's foundation speech, Soviet Politburo member A.A. Zhdanov said that the international situation was characterised by 'the imperialist and anti-democratic camp having as its basic aim the establishment of the world domination of American imperialism and the smashing of democracy, and the anti-imperialist and democratic camp having as its basic aim the undermining of imperialism, the consolidation of democracy and the eradication of the remnants of fascism'. This 'Two Camps' thesis was published in Communist Party newspapers across the world on 5 October, and complemented on the same day by a statement broadcast from Moscow which revived the sectarian 'class against class' analysis of the Comintern's 1928-33 Third Period. This drew attention to the 'special place in the imperialists' arsenal of tactical weapons' which was occupied by 'treacherous' western European socialists, including Attlee and Bevin, who hid behind a socialist mask in order to deceive the working class.⁷⁸

There were clear limitations to this initiative. Under Stalin's leadership the activities of the old Communist International had been bound by the requirements of Soviet foreign policy, operating as a counter-revolutionary instrument in China in the 1920s and in Spain from 1936. The Cominform was even more more unambiguously devoted to the Soviet foreign policy. 'So little', notes Isaac Deutscher, 'did Stalin think of

⁷⁶Bullock, *Foreign Secretary*, p.422.

⁷⁷Bullock, *Foreign Secretary*, pp.417-22; Cairncross, *op. cit.*, p.21; Hennessy, *op. cit.*, pp.294-5; Pelling, *Marshall Plan*, p.13.

⁷⁸'Two Camps' thesis and Moscow broadcast extensively quoted in *The Times*, 6 October 1947.

turning the Cominform into any genuine instrument of international revolution that he did not ask the Chinese or other Asian parties to adhere to the new organisation. His chief concern, outside the Soviet "sphere of influence", was to adjust the policies of the French and Italian Communists to the new needs of his diplomacy.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the establishment of Cominform does represent an important reference point in the cold war's intensification, for the west read much into its vilification of French Socialists and British Labourites, and the task which the new organisation set for Communist Parties in the 'imperialist camp': namely to 'head the resistance to the plans of imperialist expansion and aggression in all respects - State, political, economic and ideological'.⁸⁰ Shorn of Stalinist verbiage, this implied firstly an attempt to separate social democratic leaders from their working class followers in the west; and secondly, a threat to disrupt the Marshall Aid-driven process of European recovery through reconstituted working class movements.

The British Trade Union Movement was fully alive to Cominform's apparent threat, and the guiding principle that had shaped its position on economic recovery - the defence of trade unionism - also ensured that the TUC would strongly support Bevin's anti-communist foreign policy. In the difficult 1948-49 period which followed the establishment of Cominform and the collapse of the Council of Foreign Ministers in December 1947, the crucial European developments to be recounted are as follows: in 1948, the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia on 25 February, Truman's signature of the Economic Co-operation Bill on 3 April, the defeat of the anti-Marshall Aid PCI-PSI alliance in the Italian general election on 18 April, and the Soviet blockade of Berlin which began on 24 June; in 1949, Bevin's signature of the NATO Pact on 4 April, and on 12 May the lifting of the Berlin blockade and the approval of the NATO Pact in the House of Commons. Throughout these troubled times Attlee's Government enjoyed full support from the TUC. As on economic questions, Government-TUC cooperation on international affairs was organised through party rather than state mechanisms. At Labour Conferences, for instance, block votes assiduously delivered by the General Council's 'big battalions' - Deakin of the Transport Workers, Charlie Dukes of the General and Municipal Workers and Will Lawther of the Mineworkers - annually lent massive

⁷⁹Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin. A political biography*, pp.570-1.

⁸⁰Moscow broadcast, *The Times*, 6 October 1947.

weight to the defeat of Bevin's foreign policy dissentients.⁸¹ This support was derived from the informal rules of the labour alliance, which required these and other General Council heavyweights to demonstrate 'solidarity' with their political comrades. The TUC's anti-communism was also derived from the reordered priorities of trade unionism in the new situation of Cold War. As in the 1930s when the TUC stance on collective security and rearmament had been taken to counter the threat of fascism to working class industrial organisations, so did the TUC in the later 1940s enter the international fray to defend trade unionism against communism.

There was, in addition, a long history of conflict between communists and their socialist and labourist opponents in the British labour movement, dating from the very foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. The new party had sought affiliation to the Labour Party, taking Lenin's advice that to work for a Labour Government which would rapidly discredit reformist socialism - 'support Henderson in the same way as the rope supports a hanged man' - would readily equip communism with an avenue to the organised working class.⁸² With affiliation to Labour denied them, the CPGB attempted to gain a foothold in trade unions. To this end, again in accordance with communism's international tactics, the National Minority Movement was established in 1924. In this initiative the Party enjoyed greater success, with the NMM candidate and communist sympathiser Arthur Cook elected as Secretary of the Miners Federation in 1924.⁸³ The TUC was greatly antagonised by these activities, interpreting centrally controlled NMM groups as a threat to trade union democracy, and the factional 'political' campaigns as jeopardising labour movement unity.⁸⁴

The wider labour movement was further repelled by the Stalinist Comintern's Third Period 'Class against Class' analysis, adopted by the CPGB in 1928, which Cominform was to revive in 1947.⁸⁵ Labour's industrial and political leaders were characterised as 'social fascists', with their

⁸¹Minkin, op. cit., p.64.

⁸²Lenin's (often misquoted) remarks from *Left Wing Communism. An Infantile Disorder*, pp.90-1.

⁸³Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause. British Communism 1920-1991*, p.37.

⁸⁴Minkin, op. cit., p.8, p.38.

⁸⁵'Third Period' of a modern epoch, with capitalism allegedly in dying throes; was said to have been reached after the 1914-20 imperialist war and revolutionary sequels and 1920-7 partial stabilisation of capitalism. Thompson, op.cit., pp.44-51.

attempts to reform capitalism making them the chief enemy of the working class. As the true identity of the greatest threat to international workers, Nazism, revealed itself in the thirties, the Comintern analysis was again transformed and the TUC's patience with communists finally snapped. The 1934 Popular Front campaign launched by communists for concerted working class and progressive resistance to fascism was rebutted in October by the TUC's 'Black Circular', which barred communists from Trades Councils and urged unions to exclude communists from office.⁸⁶ The labour movement's general exasperation with the CPGB was compounded in October 1939, after the Party's Central Committee had belatedly realigned its position on the war in accordance with the Nazi-Soviet Pact. On 4 September the *Daily Worker* had proclaimed its fullest support for the anti-fascist war, and on 14 September the Party published a pamphlet by General Secretary Harry Pollitt, entitled *How to Win the War*. Once the implications of Stalin's new strategy had been fully absorbed however, on 4 October the Central Committee denounced as 'imperialist' the war in which the wider labour movement was fighting for its very survival.⁸⁷ With the Nazi invasion of the USSR in June 1941, the CPGB recast itself as a vigorous advocate of increased industrial production, and was certainly the fiercest opponent of unofficial strike action.⁸⁸ The truce with the wider labour movement was an uneasy one, however, with the CPGB holding out for the maintenance of a coalition Government long after Labour and the TUC had recognised the wisdom of fighting the 1945 election independently.

After the war this historical tension was given a fresh twist by the activities of the World Federation of Trade Unions, of which the TUC was a founding member. Established at Paris in October 1945 on the foundations of the 1942 Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Committee, the WFTU sought to unite trade unionists across international and ideological barriers, but has been described by Denis MacShane as 'a fascinating paradigm' for students of the Cold War; established 'to bring together communist and non-communist

⁸⁶John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *The Slump*, p.143.

⁸⁷Francis King and George Matthews (eds.), *About Turn*, is a verbatim account of the 24 September-3 October 1939 Central Committee sessions which discussed the new position.

⁸⁸Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p.215; for an interesting Trotskyist account of the CPGB in war-time, see Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Two Steps Back*.

unions, it fell apart as the Cold War gathered in intensity'.⁸⁹ Arthur Deakin assumed the WFTU Presidency in September 1946 against the advice of Bevin, who warned that the trade union international would gradually become subordinate to Soviet demands and interests, and that a non-communist president would lend the de facto communist organisation a false legitimacy.⁹⁰ These cautionary words accurately anticipated Deakin's WFTU presidential experiences. In virtually every sphere of WFTU activity, from demands that it support a trade embargo against fascist Spain - which the British Government opposed and which Deakin resisted - to the sending of international delegations to Asia and Africa, the President detected the spectre of ulterior communist motive. Meanwhile, communists on the body's Secretariat, such as Louis Saillant of the French CGT and the Soviet leader V.V. Kuznetsov, took equal ideological objection to their President's position on a number of other international developments, most notably Marshall Aid.

Indeed, it was this very question, the WFTU's response to the European Recovery Programme, which led to the organisation's demise. At the Executive Bureau on 20 November 1947 Saillant and his allies resisted an attempt by James Carey of the American Congress of Industrial Organisations formally to pronounce WFTU support for the ERP.⁹¹ With an acrimonious session of the Council of Foreign Ministers already underway in London, the TUC seized the initiative, warning that if the WFTU had not discussed the Marshall Plan by mid-February, then it would consider itself free to open discussions with national labour organisations which favoured the programme. Two days after the Foreign Ministers' meeting had adjourned without resolution on 15 December, Bevin told Marshall that the 'essential task was to create confidence in Western Europe that further communist inroads would be stopped', and that in this he was 'much fortified' by the TUC's initiative.⁹² Bevin appears to have disingenuously overlooked his own role in the development of TUC international strategy. After Saillant had responded to the General Council's December ultimatum by stating that the Executive Bureau could not possibly meet before 1 April, the TUC pressed ahead with its threat, and organised a conference of 26

⁸⁹Denis MacShane, 'Workers of the World Unite?', *History Today*, September 1990.

⁹⁰V.L.Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*, p.290.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 294-6.

⁹²Bullock, *Foreign Secretary*, p.499.

organisations from 14 countries. Held in London on 9 and 10 March, within days of the coup in Czechoslovakia, this gathering established a Trade Union Advisory Committee to effect liaison with the Committee for European Economic Cooperation which was administering the Marshall Plan in London. Henry Pelling notes Bevin's hand in the timing of the conference in a memo from the Foreign Secretary to his labour attaché in Washington on 19 February: 'I had advocated early in March because this would have a steadying effect in Europe, and also show America before the US vote on the ERP where genuine trade unionists stood.'⁹³

Bevin also helped to secure the presence at this conference of the virulently anti-communist American Federation of Labour. The AFL had refused to join the WFTU because of its communist elements, and had eschewed any co-operation with its national rival, the CIO, on similar if clearly unjustifiable grounds. The cold war situation brought the AFL new opportunities to pursue its intolerance of communism. In 1947 its European representative, Irving Brown, in concert with the US security forces and using CIA funds, helped to establish the French break-away labour organisation Force Ouvrière to undermine the CGT. Brown then approached Bevin, asking him to push the TUC into an open breach with the WFTU. Bevin and the TUC were reluctant to do this; as with the shadow boxing over the European response to Marshall's offer the previous summer, they were anxious not to allow domestic communist opponents any opportunity to exploit the embedded hostility of the labour movement to 'splitters'. However, again operating through his Washington labour attaché, Bevin steadied the AFL with the assurance that he was encouraging the TUC to organise the London conference.⁹⁴

The breakdown in the WFTU's internal relations dragged on for almost a whole year until the anti-communist unions seceded on 17 January 1949. The formal occasion for the final break was communist insistence on the establishment of centralised trade departments which were plainly irreconcilable with the western pluralistic tradition of 'separate sphere' trade union democracy. However, the central impediment to a split had been removed at the Trades Union Congress in September 1948, when Deakin had obtained for the General Council plenary powers to proceed on the WFTU as it saw fit. This allowed the TUC to withdraw constitutionally,

⁹³Pelling, *Marshall Plan*, pp.62-63.

⁹⁴Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*, pp.295-6; Pelling, *Marshall Plan*, pp.62-3.

without drawing accusations of arbitrarily splitting the international body, and the decision to withdraw was endorsed by at the 1949 Congress by 6,250,000 votes to 1,017,000.⁹⁵ Having abandoned the WFTU, the General Council set about cultivating the international links which had been formally established at the London conference in March 1948. As the WFTU prepared to transfer its organisational headquarters from Paris to Prague, the TUC arranged a paving meeting of a new international. This was held in London on 25 and 26 June 1949, and an International Confederation of Free Trade Unions was formally launched five months later.⁹⁶

DOMESTIC COMMUNIST INFLUENCE

The TUC's anti-communism also required Deakin and his colleagues to resist communism within their own organisations. Communism had made very little electoral headway in Britain. Within the context of Labour's 1945 landslide only two communists, Willie Gallacher in West Fife and Phil Piratin in London's Mile End, had been elected. Nevertheless, it did appear to be gaining industrial strength, and from 1947 the General Council was increasingly concerned, given the course of international and economic developments, that communists might be able to disrupt seriously Britain's recovery.

In February 1948, on the day that the wage freeze was launched, *The Times* published an article by its Industrial Correspondent on the extent of communism's industrial progress. This indicated that communism's industrial base lay in the two large craft unions, with party members contesting control of the Engineers' Executive and occupying the presidency and secretaryship of the Electricians. These represented two potentially significant holdings, with the Engineers carrying a membership of 723,000 and the Electricians 162,000. However, the overall balance of TUC forces greatly hindered the prospect of much further communist advance. In the TGWU - which, with a membership of 1,324,000, was Britain's largest Union in 1948⁹⁷ - communists had made some headway. They held 8 seats on the 38-member General Executive Committee and 3 positions out of 8 on the Finance and General Purposes Committee: an

⁹⁵Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*, pp.306-12.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷MRC/MSS.126/T&G/4/1/27, TGWU General Executive Council Report, 1948.

advance sufficient to place a single communist, Bert Papworth, on the TUC General Council as a TGWU representative. However, like Bevin before him, Deakin was a skilful operator in by-passing left opposition, and in 1948 enjoyed the further political advantage of there being no Biennial Delegate Conference at which communist opponents might have attempted to rally opposition to the wage freeze and his support for Bevin's 'warmongering' foreign policy. The Miners' election of a communist, Arthur Horner, as secretary in 1946 ran against the overall balance of power in the NUM; on the executive communists held only 6 positions from 28.⁹⁸ Moreover, the union's two other dominant personalities, President Will Lawther and the Northumbrian leader, Sam Watson, largely shared Deakin's assumptions on the nature of communism and the unions' responsibilities to the Labour Government. The same could be said of Tom Williamson, General Secretary of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, which had never departed from its 1926-8 position that membership of the CP or National Minority Movement was 'inconsistent with loyal attachment to the Union', effectively barring communists from office.⁹⁹

The combined weight of these three unions alone, around three million votes in an affiliated TUC membership of 7,937,091, was indicative of the strength of the TUC's anti-communist majority.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, with Deakin as its dominant figure, the General Council regarded communist activity with intense vigilance. A communist General Secretary of the TGWU was improbable,¹⁰¹ but a communist majority on either of the Union's important committees could not necessarily be ruled out in the long term. Worryingly for the TUC, communists were still emerging with success in the spate of trade union electoral activity which had accompanied, since the war, an unprecedented turnover in the personnel of trade union leadership. *The Times's* industrial correspondent pointed this out: 'In spite of the sharpening cleavage between Communist and non-Communist based on international divisions, Communists on the whole have

⁹⁸*The Times*, 9 February 1948.

⁹⁹H.A.Clegg, *General Union*, pp.117-122.

¹⁰⁰Henry Pelling, *British Trade Unionism*, statistical appendix, pp.260-5.

¹⁰¹In being elected General Secretary, Deakin polled 203,314 votes to Papworth's 47,378; but 620,370 ballot papers were returned unused; *Transport and General Workers' Record*, December 1945.

held their ground in these national elections, and have maintained their disproportionate influence.¹⁰²

The General Council's position on the WFTU, ERP, wages and productivity was vindicated at the TUC conference in September 1948, and with its authority enhanced, the General Council duly turned attention to the question of communism's role in the British labour movement. Writing to TUC General Secretary Vincent Tewson on 26 October, Deakin stated that, 'it was necessary for the General Council to give consideration to the continued interference by the Communist Party with the working of the Trades Councils and Trade Unions ... and to decide upon what action should be taken.'¹⁰³

The General Council on 27 October duly approved the publication of a short statement 'Trade Unions and Communism'. This emphasised the links between Cominform's opposition to the Marshall Plan, the Communist Party's opposition to the economic policy which had been agreed at the recent Margate TUC, and unofficial industrial action:

The Communist Parties, under the direction of the Cominform, have been specifically ordered to oppose the Marshall Plan. Statements made officially by spokesmen of the Communist Party prove beyond question that sabotage of the European Recovery Programme is its present aim. Communist influences are everywhere at work to frame industrial demands for purposes of political agitation; to magnify industrial grievances; and to bring about stoppages in industry.

It is clear that the Communist Parties are doing their utmost to wreck the entire recovery efforts of Britain and of the European countries which have accepted the offer of American co-operation and financial aid. The General Council of the Trades Union Congress, therefore, direct the serious attention of all trade unionists to the malignant character of Communist agitation and organisation. They urge the Executives of all affiliated Unions, their District and Branch Committees, and responsible officers and loyal members to counteract every manifestation of Communist influences within their Unions; and to open the eyes of all workpeople to the dangerous subversive influences which are being engineered in opposition to the declared policy of the Trade Union Movement.¹⁰⁴

The statement, issued to the press and circulated to the TUC's affiliated organisations, was re-issued one month later along with a subsequent statement which the General Council had authorised on 24 November. The

¹⁰²*The Times*, 10 February 1948.

¹⁰³MRC/MSS.292/20/33, Deakin to Tewson 26 October 1948, discussed in TUC General Council, 27 October 1948.

¹⁰⁴MRC/MSS.292/23.1/27, TUC Circular No.18 (1948-9).

extended pamphlet, *Defend Democracy*, strongly re-affirmed traditional trade union values: it was the duty of every trade unionist to observe loyally decisions taken by a democratic majority. This was contrasted with the fractious behaviour of the communist minority, which was not prepared to accept the majority verdict passed at Margate by the TUC on a number of issues. In defending political and trade union democracy against communism, the pamphlet crucially observed: 'It is a matter for consideration by the Unions whether it is consistent with the obligations of loyalty to the policy of the Union and to the Movement as a whole that any member should serve on the Communist Party industrial sub-committees or on the national committees of the Communist Party whilst holding executive or delegate office in the Union.'¹⁰⁵

The statement thus enabled unions to exclude communists from official positions; but the initiative's significance transcended the General Council's desire to exclude communists from union office. The very fact of the anti-communist initiative emanating from within the labour movement was perceived by the TUC as indispensable to its success. Exhortations from the Government, even a Labour Government, would not have the same impact, and any intervention from employers would certainly prove counter-productive. The labour alliance 'rules' of behaviour had required the TUC 'voluntarily' to police the Government's wages policy; these rules also determined that the industrial organisations of the working class would be the only effective instruments for marshalling wider ideological resistance to the communism that threatened the survival of these organisations. On 28 October Tewson was contacted by a London manufacturing employer who expressed pleasure at reading the General Council's 'forthright and realistic' declaration in the evening papers, and asking, 'if you will provide us with a full copy of it, and allow us to reprint it and distribute it amongst our workpeople'. This request elicited a highly significant response from the TUC, with George Woodcock, Tewson's assistant, replying on 1 November, 'I am very sorry but I do not think that we can give you permission to reprint the statement for distribution in this way. It would, I am sure, go a long way to destroy the value of the effect of

¹⁰⁵MRC/MSS.292/23.1/27, TUC pamphlet *Defend Democracy*.

the statement if it were to be reproduced and circulated by an employer.'¹⁰⁶

The propaganda offensive was maintained in 1949. The TUC's withdrawal from the WFTU was accompanied by a second General Council pamphlet, *The Tactics of Disruption*, which restated the unscrupulous and fractious methods of the CPGB as it sought to capture strategic positions in unions and trades councils.¹⁰⁷ At the same time the TGWU, the TUC's largest affiliate, began its own internal anti-communist campaign, six months before a Biennial Delegate Conference at which Deakin intended to secure rule changes that would exclude communists from office. Writing in the *Record*, he repeated the charges made against communism in the TUC pamphlets, and warned that international communism planned to disrupt Britain's economic recovery with a concerted campaign of strike action in the year ahead.¹⁰⁸ On the eve of the July Conference he heightened the debate's temperature, claiming that the on-going unofficial dock strike vindicated his January forecast. In a *Record* article entitled 'Trade Unionism v. Communism: The Gloves Are Off!' Deakin asserted:

We must take active, practical and immediate steps to deal with the menace in our midst. ... Those people who assume unofficial leadership, who are constantly to the forefront in every dispute which arises, must be dealt with and given their marching orders.¹⁰⁹

During the conference which followed, Edgar E. Fryer, the Union's Chairman, re-emphasised the twin dangers of unofficial strike action and communist interference, and the rule changes excluding communists from office with effect from 1 January 1950, were duly obtained.¹¹⁰ Five months later, the General Executive also initiated disciplinary proceedings against eight members who had been prominent in the London unofficial dock strike, which led to three expulsions from the Union in April 1950.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶MRC/MSS.292/777.5/1, correspondence between John Eddington & Co. Ltd. and TUC General Council, 28 October to 1 November 1948.

¹⁰⁷MRC/MSS.292/777.5/1, TUC pamphlet *The Tactics of Disruption*.

¹⁰⁸*Transport and General Workers' Record*, January 1949.

¹⁰⁹*Transport and General Workers' Record*, July 1949.

¹¹⁰MRC/MSS.126/1/4/13, TGWU 1949 Biennial Delegate Conference Report.

¹¹¹This episode is discussed in Chapter 7.

The TGWU rule changes, described by the *Daily Worker* as a 'cowardly decision',¹¹² took effect quickly. Within two months Bert Papworth was attending his final TUC General Council meeting, the minutes of which only record - without apparent irony - that:

The Chairman [Tewson] referred to the retirement from the General Council of Mr Cowley, Mr Wolstonecroft and Mr Burrows and to the termination of membership of the Council of Mr Papworth. He expressed on behalf of the Council the good wishes to those members. Mr Papworth suitably responded.¹¹³

At the General Council in February 1950 consideration was given to the possible establishment of a National Anti-Communist Committee. Deakin rejected the notion out of hand, and with Tewson's support the matter was dropped.¹¹⁴ Later in the year, as the Korean War revived international tension, Deakin would return to the question of communism's role in British trade unions. Indeed, in the company of the Archbishop of Canterbury the TGWU General Secretary was to press, in vain, for the banning of the CPGB. This is discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. In the spring of 1950 however, with economic recovery underway, international communism apparently contained, and of course the Labour Government re-elected - albeit with a drastically reduced majority - the General Council was happy that its contributions to the labour alliance had fully been paid.

CONCLUSION

The opening chapter of this thesis has been concerned, essentially, with the development of two general, closely-related themes. The first concerns the historical nature of the often misunderstood relationship between the Labour Party and the Trade Unions, which has never prevented Labour from laying claim to protect interests beyond its original constituent basis. The other relates how the 1945 Labour Government was occupied with perplexing economic and international questions as much as with the establishment of 'New Jerusalem', and enjoyed valuable support from the TUC in attempting to cultivate economic regeneration and international

¹¹²*Daily Worker*, 12 July 1949.

¹¹³MRC/MSS.292/20/33, TUC General Council, 9 September 1949.

¹¹⁴MRC/MSS.292/20/34, TUC General Council, 22 February 1950.

containment of communism. This assistance from the TUC - coming to its Government's aid - on economic and international matters, represents the point at which the twin themes of the labour alliance's historical character and the nature of the particular Labour Government intersect.

The chapters which follow have a more specific focus: the port transport industry and dock workers' unofficial strike action in the six years which followed the 1945 General Election. This discussion, paying due attention to the difficulties which the Labour Governments experienced in a particular area of the industrial economy, will bring fresh understanding to the two themes referred to in the previous paragraph. Firstly, the governments' pugnacious response to unofficial dock strikes, which was motivated by broader economic and international (or ideological) considerations rather than the traditional industrial assumptions that might have been expected from an administration not short of trade union experience, revealed Labour's national rather than sectional aspirations under Attlee and Bevin. Secondly, and more importantly, the docks provided a particularly stern test for the post-1945 Labour alliance. At a time of great economic emergency, TGWU officials in the docks were periodically unable to exert the sort of discipline amongst their members which the Government demanded.

CHAPTER 2

THE SITUATION AT THE DOCKS

THE PORTS AS A SPECIAL CASE

The success of the 1945-51 Labour Governments has been partly measured by some historians in terms of the relatively calm industrial scene. Kenneth O. Morgan contrasts the two post-war periods: 178,000,000 working days lost to strikes from 1918-23, and only 9,730,000 from 1945-50. This phenomenon he ascribes to the 1945 emphasis on social spending and full employment. Moreover, a 'decisive commitment was made to removing the discredited managements of the coal and other industries, instead of returning to the follies of "decontrol" and private capitalism', as had happened after the First World War.¹ These observations - coming from one of the 1945-51 Governments' leading historians - provide an extremely interesting perspective on the situation at the docks. In the port transport industry 'private capitalism' had been partially fettered since the First World War. The process of regulation - continuing after 1918 - had been consolidated by Ernest Bevin during the Second World War, and by the 1947 Dock Labour Scheme. The latter measure was regarded by the Government and the Transport and General Workers' Union as a particular triumph, involving significant and lasting benefit for the workforce. Nonetheless, the industry witnessed a disproportionate level of strike activity. In the seven calendar years 1945-51, 14.27 million working days were lost in all industries. Of these, 2.89 million were lost in the docks, where only about 80,000 people were actually employed. By way of comparison, during the same period 3.97 million days were lost in the traditionally unruly coal mining industry, where approximately 700,000 men were employed. In crude terms, the average docker was on strike six times more often than the average coal miner.² This relatively high level of strike activity in the docks industry - at a time when its labour relations were

¹Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-1951*, p.499. Morgan's figures, it perhaps should be said, are a bit confusing. From the Statistical Table provided in Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp.261-3, it would appear that Morgan's 9.73 million days were lost in the five calendar years 1946-50. For the seven calendar years 1945-51, the aggregate figure was 14,260,000. Pelling cites the source of these statistics (*Ministry of Labour Gazette*); Morgan does not.

²PRO: LAB 34/60-67, Trade Disputes (All Industries) 1945-51.

undergoing substantial reform - singles this area of the economy out as a subject of particular historical concern: developments within the industry between 1945 and 1951 heightened the problems facing the Governments; they also help to clarify for the historian of these Governments what these problems were.

The Labour Governments were always extremely sensitive to the incidence of strike action in the docks, particularly given the industry's central importance to Britain's economic recovery. With imported food and raw materials, and manufacturing exports - the trade essential to maintaining national economic life - of necessity passing through the ports, any dislocation was extremely unwelcome. When dockers went on strike the Government sought to remind them of the economic consequences of their actions; of the price being paid by their comrades in the labour movement and fellow British citizens in lost imports arising from delays in the turn-round of shipping. Apart from a celebrated broadcast made by Prime Minister Clement Attlee during the London dock strike of June 1948,³ however, these appeals were largely unsuccessful. With persuasion alone generally failing, the Government was prepared to use more active strike-breaking methods. Large numbers of troops were deployed in the docks on six separate occasions: during two strikes in 1945, and once each in 1947, 1948, 1949 and 1950. 'Join the army and see Smithfield', went one Cockney barb, as troops in and around the Port of London became a regular sight. Conscripts also saw action in other major docks - Avonmouth, Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool and Southampton.⁴ This thesis seeks to place the unofficial dock strikes in the context of the Government's economic and international problems, and for this purpose the nature of the stoppages, and the extent of the military intervention, will be explored in separate chapters on three of these six disputes. These three centred around various ports in October 1945; in London in June 1948; and on the Avon, the Mersey and in London again between May and July 1949. The three are singled out, firstly, because they were by far the largest disputes in the docks during the period, and secondly, because of the significant contrast in the Government's handling of the three stoppages, as the wider economic and international problems grew in intensity from 1947 onwards.

All of these strikes were unofficial. Under the wartime emergency regulation, Compulsory Arbitration Order 1305, which remained in force until

³Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, pp.422-3.

⁴Steve Peak, *Troops in Strikes*, pp. 83-98.

1951, official strikes were expressly forbidden. In any event the dockers' official industrial leadership, the Transport and General Workers' Union was, as a determined supporter of the Labour Government that was bringing unprecedented economic and social benefits to its members, implacably opposed to strike action. Yet the willingness of dockers to strike - in defiance of the law, the Government and their Union leaders - sat readily with the often turbulent and - for the workforce - sometimes painful history of the industry since the late nineteenth century.

Fernand Braudel, the celebrated French historian, has emphasised the importance of interpreting history in as long a historical context as possible. A human being operates, he wrote, 'in a landscape in which the infinite perspectives of the long-term, *la longue durée*, stretch into the distance both behind him and before'.⁵ As for the Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II, so for the Avon, the Clyde, the Mersey and the Thames in the Age of Arthur Deakin. Preliminary comment on the long-term structural features of British port labour provides an invaluable initial perspective on the short-term events which surrounded the 1945 Labour Government's experiment in reform with the 1947 Dock Labour Scheme. This chapter examines the Scheme's origins: the immediate impact of wartime developments and the more remote accumulation of events between the Edwardian era and 1939. This discussion will bring out the intrinsic problems of dock labour reform, and indicate that the Scheme did not fully resolve these problems, which, left in abeyance, were to dog the 1945-51 Labour Governments.

THE LONG-TERM ANTECEDENTS AND ORIGINS OF THE 1947 DOCK LABOUR SCHEME

The port transport industry was transformed by the huge expansion of British commercial activity in the nineteenth century; with the handful of harbour cities that were central to economic life in 1945 - most notably London and Liverpool - established in their importance by the late Victorian era.⁶ An equally significant legacy of the nineteenth century, perhaps, was the system of casual labour relations, with the bulk of the workforce recruited on a daily,

⁵Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II*, p.664.

⁶Gordon Phillips and Noel Whiteside, *Casual Labour. The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry 1880-1970*, pp.12-13.

or even half-daily basis. This had survived the scrutiny of the 1905-14 reformist Liberal administrations, the First World War and the interwar efforts of the TGWU, as well as the limited 'decasualisation' legislation of 1940-41. Indeed the 1947 Dock Labour Scheme, a subject of discussion later in this chapter, also failed to eliminate casualism which was not entirely dispensed with until 1967 by a later Labour Government.⁷

Fernand Braudel's assumptions about the nature of human society's historical development, shaped centrally by imperceptibly changing environmental factors, might plausibly be applied to the British port transport industry, and more particularly to the longevity of casual labour in this industry. While casualism's endurance may be attributed to the conservatism of employers and dock workers alike, with each side of industry resistant to reform,⁸ the employers' position in the first instance was informed by the physical geography of the British Isles. The majority of the islands' ports, unlike many on Continental Europe, were tidal and the flow of ships into British harbours was uneven as a result. With another environmental variable being wind - in terms both of speed and direction - employers were persuaded that they ought only to recruit workers as and when the presence of ships required.⁹ The apparent wisdom of this course was further emphasised by the fluctuating nature of international trade, and the large reserve army of labour which was available to them. Employers defended this position on three other counts: firstly, regular workers were by nature less productive than casual employees owing to the greater security of their position; secondly, as employers they believed that a permanent system would deny them their reserved right to choose specialised workers themselves; and thirdly, decasualisation would ultimately strengthen the position of organised labour.¹⁰

Employers seeking to maintain this position at the docks faced their first serious challenge towards the end of the nineteenth century. The year 1889 might reasonably be cited as an important watershed, containing the great strike of August and September in the Port of London, and the publication of Charles Booth's preliminary research on social conditions in

⁷Stephen Hill, *The Dockers. Class and Tradition in London*, p.14.

⁸Jonathan Schneer, 'The War, The State and the Workplace: British Dockers During 1914-1918', in J.E.Cronin and J.Schneer (eds.), *Social Conflict and the Political Order in Modern Britain*, p.97.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Phillips and Whiteside, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-57.

London's east end. Although John Lovell has emphasised that important developments in dock labour organisation had taken place prior to 1889,¹¹ the conjunction of industrial upheaval and the revelation that considerable economic hardship characterised work and life in the Empire's first city, prompted at least the beginnings of wider public interest in the docks industry.¹²

Booth and other observers in the 1890s indicated the existence in the docks of a body of steady and reliable men, but it was to other findings in their work that public attention was largely paid. Booth was concerned, among many other things, in maximising the employment opportunities for the reliable men. This involved demonstrating that the casual system allowed many people who were unwilling or unable to take up regular employment, to use the docks as a refuge.¹³ Exclusion of these inefficient and rootless workers was an essential precondition to the eradication of under-employment and poverty in the dock communities. It was with these occupationally rootless and therefore demoralised elements that the public equated the dock labourforce as a whole. As John Lovell has stated, in this period 'waterside work was regarded by the public less as a genuine industrial occupation than as a residual employment for the refuse and unemployed of society at large.'¹⁴

With casual labour identified as a central obstacle to a more efficient labour market, its general industrial incidence was a central concern of the the 1905-14 Liberal Governments. From 1908 the Board of Trade sought the eradication of under-employment through casual labour by instituting a national system of labour exchanges. The docks were acknowledged as a special case, and the Board of Trade opened discussions with the Port of London Authority, newly-established to govern the capital's docks and waterways, with a view to opening specific dock agencies with the blessing of port employers. These would continuously move workers from one engagement to the next, requiring employers to forego independent recruitment and to accept the exchanges as their sole source of labour. The Port of London Authority, strongly reflecting the parsimony and prejudices of the port employers, excused the lack of progress with this labour exchange scheme on

¹¹John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp.59-91.

¹²Phillips and Whiteside, *op. cit.*, p.43.

¹³Lovell, *op. cit.*, p.121; Phillips and Whiteside, *op. cit.*, p.45.

¹⁴Lovell, *op. cit.*, p.31.

grounds of cost - supposedly prohibitive - and the upsurge of industrial conflict in 1911 and 1912.¹⁵

The Liberals' approach to the general question of poverty arising from unemployment also involved the social insurance schemes which were enacted in 1911. This presented difficulties in industries where casual employment was predominant. Dockers were covered for health insurance from the start, but not for unemployment insurance until 1920. The array of complexities involved in this issue are beyond the scope of this study, and in any event have been discussed at length elsewhere.¹⁶ However, the attempt to operate health insurance did involve the first experiment in docks decasualisation. Between 1911 and 1912 in Liverpool, the second largest group of docks after London, a registration scheme for dock labour was devised by the labour exchanges' divisional officer, with the co-operation of employers and the Dockers' Union. Aimed partly at bringing dock workers under the health provisions of the 1911 insurance legislation, it also aimed to comb out an estimated redundant surplus of 7,000 from the 27,000 who normally sought work in the port.

The scheme offered no alteration in the casual methods of hiring labour, but as a first step to decasualisation it was important enough. The Liverpool scheme indicated two additional items of significance. Firstly, it provided evidence that industrial relations in the British docks industry were characterised by considerable regional diversity. The scheme would not have been launched in Liverpool had it not been for the relatively positive relationship between employers and union leaders. After the 1911 strike the employers, who were primarily shipowners whose export cargoes depended on a stable industrial atmosphere, were persuaded to allow the National Union of Dock Labourers to organise their employees and to give Union members preference of employment.¹⁷ This contrasted greatly with the tense situation in the Port of London, where employers successfully forced a show-down on the issue of union monopoly of the labour supply less than a year after the 1911 strike.¹⁸ Secondly, at least according to Phillips and Whiteside, the most serious obstacle to the scheme's success was the angry response it provoked from the workforce. Many dockers were naturally hostile to the threatened

¹⁵Phillips and Whiteside, *op.cit.*, pp.77-85.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp.71-111.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p.90.

¹⁸Lovell, *op. cit.*, pp.180-213.

redundancies, and were also bitter about the apparent new discipline which registration would exert on their working lives. In the face of widespread animosity the sponsors of the scheme were forced to dilute their proposals, easing the credentials for registration required of a prospective docker. The scheme duly had only a limited impact on the size, attendance and productivity of the workforce.¹⁹

The attitude of the Liverpool men in 1912 indicated the ambivalence felt by dock workers generally towards casual employment. Although dock workers' living standards continued to advance throughout the first four decades of the twentieth century,²⁰ during the pre-1940 period the casual system exposed dock communities to a level of economic insecurity unknown to regularly-employed workers. Whilst a significant number of skilled workers were regularly engaged - the permanent men or 'perms' - the vast majority of work was obtained in perilous and degrading circumstances. Dockers were obliged to gather at the numerous 'calling-on' points which were scattered around the nation's harbours, of which in the Port of London alone in 1914 there were 500.²¹ These calls were conducted twice-daily, with the respective foremen of individual port employers choosing the thirteen individuals that would typically comprise the gang for a particular job. This manner of recruitment was extremely competitive, and with dockers struggling to gain the attention of omnipotent foremen, physical violence 'on the stones' - the call-on stance - was not unusual.²² Once engaged the docker was not even guaranteed the security of a full day's work. The foreman's own position was dependent on a level of performance from his recruits that would satisfy his employer, with gangs working for their *foremen* as much as they were working for shipowners, dock companies or wharfingers. He duly retained the power to dismiss morning recruits and re-engage his labour at the mid-day call. With work over the docker would be paid off, generally from coins out of the foremen's pocket, usually in the street but often in a dockside pub.²³

Despite these obvious disadvantages of work and life in dock communities under the casual regime, which included high levels of ill-health

¹⁹Phillips and Whiteside, *op.cit.*, pp.93-4.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp.208-9.

²¹Schneer, *op.cit.*, p.97.

²²Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin. Volume I, Trade Union Leader 1881-1940*, pp.117-118.

²³*Ibid.*

and poor housing,²⁴ there were a number of positive features which Edwardian and later reformers tended to overlook. For one thing, the workforce was far from being the demoralised and rootless body that Booth and others sometimes implied. John Lovell presents a convincing argument that in fact a far greater degree of stability surrounded casual dock labour. In London, 'although casually employed, this labour force was in fact a regular body. It was composed of men who regularly looked for work at the waterside, and who rarely sought, and even more rarely obtained, work anywhere else.'²⁵ This was highly significant, for it contradicted the generally perceived nature of dock workers as an underclass - a 'motley horde of unfortunates'.²⁶ Whilst a rootless element did exist, the sizeable majority followed regular employers and regular types of work within the Port. According to Lovell the regular accepted that a refusal to move around on a daily basis to look for work would involve under-employment; but this very immobility allowed him to specialise in a particular skill, and to cultivate a relationship with a particular employer. These two factors guaranteed some work at least, which might not be secured through hopping from one call-on point to another.²⁷ The liking for specialisation partly informed the Liverpool men's hostility to registration, which they felt would imply a compulsion to accept alternative waterside tasks. In London too dockers were hostile to the notion of greater regulation, with the permanently employed labourer a figure to be despised. Lovell offers as characteristic a remark made in 1892 by a London docker, 'if you are made permanent you are made a white slave of directly; you are transferable from here to there and everywhere.'²⁸

The sum of these observations is that, for all its economic hardship, casualism allowed dockers a greater degree of control over patterns of work and leisure than that enjoyed by most other groups of industrial workers. Reviewing the history of dock labour in 1986, a TUC study noted that dockers held 'a genuine freedom to choose: to choose whether or not to try for work on a particular morning, and whether or not to accept or reject work which

²⁴Phillips and Whiteside, *op.cit.*, p.36.

²⁵Lovell, *op. cit.*, p.31.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*, p.32-5

²⁸*Ibid.*, p.36.

might be offered'.²⁹ Dockers were free from the constraint of the rigid six-day week: skilled piece-workers in particular could frequently earn enough money in the first part of the week to cover the cost of two or three days' complete rest at the end of the week.³⁰ As Ross McKibbin puts it, in 'the docks "come day, go day" was elevated to an art-form'.³¹

The fear that a reformed regime would jeopardise this relative freedom was confirmed by the greater discipline which characterised dock labour during the First World War. To break up congestion in the docks and to counter labour shortages, from 1916 the Government encouraged the extension of registration schemes to other ports. These varied in scope and size, but by 1920 Glasgow was the only major British port without a register. Dockers were generally resentful of this trend and, in London at least, registration was delayed until after the war because the port authorities were aware of how unpopular it would be. Traditional antipathy to greater regulation was bolstered by the Board of Trade's appointment, in conjunction with the introduction of civilian conscription, of port labour committees in thirty-two ports. Comprising representatives of employers and trade unions, a labour exchange official and service recruiting officers, these committees controlled the labour supply via employment registers and certificates which exempted registered dockers from military conscription. With the assistance of registers, port labour committees could punish absenteeism by withholding military exemption, and dockers attended the call-on far more assiduously as a result.³²

These were new methods of controlling the supply of labour, but the casual system, by which this supply was deployed, remained intact. The vast majority of workers still sought engagements on a daily basis, and their relationships with employers were unreconstructed.³³ The benefit of casual labour as perceived by the workforce, the freedom to work or rest when work was available, had been eroded; but casualism's worst feature - short-term recruitment via foremen 'on the stones' - had not been similarly undermined.

The casual system and the general ambivalence with which the work force regarded its reform, represented a serious obstacle to the organisation of

²⁹Denis Delay, *Myths about the Origins and Effects of the National Dock Labour Scheme*, TUC paper July 1986. I owe this reference to Mr. Bob Aspinall of The Museum of London Library.

³⁰Phillips and Whiteside, op.cit., p.33.

³¹Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class*, p.156.

³²Phillips and Whiteside, op.cit, p.121.

³³Ibid., p.142.

trade unions in the port transport industry. Casualism had created a workforce that was riven by two intersecting conflicts: local versus national and sectional versus industrial. In London, for instance, the multiplicity of waterside trades defied pre-1914 attempts to organise the workforce fully. Differences between shipworkers and shoreworkers, tugmen and lightermen, meat porters and corn porters, were vast, and manifested in varying levels of occupational and material status. This guaranteed that a tradition of industrial militancy - with impressive outbursts in 1872, 1889 and 1911-12 - was not supported by a tradition of sturdy and continuous organisation. The rapid growth of unionisation which accompanied each of these waves of strike activity was transitory, and 'paper' members were not brought into a vigorous branch life. Without consolidating members in the culture of trade unionism, industrial unions withered as the favourable short term conditions for organisation diminished. Only sectional societies, notably the Stevedores Union, enjoyed uninterrupted progress from the 1870s onwards.³⁴ Equally frustrating for the leaders of the Dockers' Union, established after the 1889 strike, was the absence of national unity amongst dockers, with the instability of organisation in London reflecting a nationwide trend.³⁵ In 1920 London dockers refused to load the *Jolly George* with weapons bound for use against the Red Army in Poland in 1920.³⁶ Whilst this event can be interpreted as a display of international working class solidarity, dockers in Britain generally found little reason even to support their fellow British port workers. An obvious and noble exception was the 1911 national strike, but an attempt by the National Transport Workers' Federation - established only as recently as 1910 - to repeat the trick in support of its London men in June 1912, was a complete failure.³⁷

It is within this specific historical framework, low-level organisation punctuated by occasional outbursts of mass militancy, that the establishment of the Transport and General Workers Union in 1922 must be interpreted. Clearly Ernest Bevin, first General Secretary of the new organisation, constructed the industrial union of port and transport workers on shaky historical foundations. The TGWU was unable fully to combat the weight of the industry's long history, either in the first two decades of its existence, or

³⁴Lovell, op. cit., chapters 3-7.

³⁵Ibid., p.217.

³⁶A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, p.193.

³⁷Lovell, op. cit., p.201.

indeed in the years after the Second World War. Later chapters of this thesis will attempt to place the incidence of unofficial dock strikes between 1945 and 1951 in the tradition inherited by Bevin in 1922.

Bevin had earned his nationwide reputation at the 1920 Shaw Court of Inquiry into dock labour. According to Alan Bullock his position as the 'Dockers' KC' gave him sufficient status amongst the dock labour force to secure the establishment of the TGWU.³⁸ This reputation did not immunize him or the Union from the historical problems of labour organisation in the docks. This became immediately apparent in 1923. After Bevin had settled a reduction in wages with dock employers, in order to protect his members from rising unemployment, there was an unofficial strike of some 40,000 workers which lasted for seven weeks. With the Union refusing to issue strike-pay, the men were eventually forced back without restoration of their previous pay levels. Bullock identifies the strike as a serious challenge to the authority of the new Union's leadership,³⁹ and in London the dispute permanently weakened the Union's position. In 1922 Bevin had failed to incorporate the Stevedores Union in the TGWU. After the 1923 strike numbers of dockers moved from the TGWU to this alternative source of organisation. At the same time the lightermen also withdrew from the general organisation, at first joining the Stevedores, but later establishing their own union.⁴⁰

The efficacy of the national and industrial union received greater lustre in 1924, when Bevin successfully led an official dock strike to the chagrin of the first Labour Government.⁴¹ This dispute indicated the potential for effective national waterside organisation and, as such, reflected the ambitions of a man who was, undoubtedly, the supreme union builder of the twentieth century. From an initial membership of 297,460 in 1922 the TGWU rapidly expanded. Boosted by a series of amalgamations, by 1937 it had outstripped the Miners' Federation. With a membership of 645,510 it was the biggest trade union in the world.⁴²

This union-building, whatever the general benefits which it brought to members in a multiplicity of trades, was not without its trials, however. The very diversity of the organisation tested the leadership as respective trade

³⁸Bullock, I, 122-30.

³⁹Ibid., 212-18.

⁴⁰Lovell, op. cit., p.214-5.

⁴¹Bullock, I, 236-7.

⁴²V.L.Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*, p.224; Pelling, op.cit., p.204.



groups began to strain in different directions. In the thirties, for example, Bevin frequently encountered difficulties with London busmen and their unofficial organisation, the Busmen's Rank and File Committee. These struggles were not entirely due, as Bevin publicly claimed, to the mischief of communists, such as Bert Papworth. After rising to prominence as an unofficial busmen's leader, Papworth subsequently served on the Union's Executive and the TUC General Council. Bullock notes that when the trouble began, in 1932 over a wage reduction which Bevin had agreed with the bus companies, the Rank and File Committee's motivations were economic rather than ideological. The General Secretary was forced to re-open negotiations and reclaim most of that which had been forfeited.⁴³ In view of later allegations about communist membership and tactical industrial disruption, it is important to note that Papworth - whose dissenting voice within the TGWU leadership was eventually silenced by Arthur Deakin's anti-communist rule changes in 1949 - did not actually join the CPGB until 1937.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the docks continued to plague Bevin, with the breakaway of his Glasgow members in 1932 revealing once again the difficulty of reconciling local with national interests in an industrial union of port workers. The trouble began on the question of decasualisation. The TGWU and its predecessor the Dock Workers' Union were generally keen to sponsor decasualisation, which provided an opportunity to increase union membership. In 1916 the 'best available outcome', to use Lewis Minkin's phrase,⁴⁵ had been secured through voluntary co-operation over registration and industrial conscription. This had indeed rewarded the union with a larger membership, and therefore a stronger position at the negotiating table once international hostilities, and the industrial truce, were over. A similar reasoning informed the TGWU's approach to decasualisation, with Bevin intending that control of employment registers be increasingly devolved on the Union, so that the TGWU would be able, ultimately, to demand Union membership as the necessary qualification for registration.⁴⁶ In 1930, when the Labour Government initiated a fresh inquiry into decasualisation, Glasgow

⁴³Bullock, I, 520. Unfortunately the excellent *Dictionary of Labour Biography* carries no entry for Bert Papworth, and biographical information concerning this evidently vigorous and, in some circles, popular figure, is difficult to obtain.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p.613.

⁴⁵Lewis Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance*, p.41.

⁴⁶Phillips and Whiteside, *op.cit.*, p.169.

remained the only major British port not covered by a registration scheme. At the Inquiry Bevin argued for a national decasualisation scheme, with registration made compulsory. In return for attending the call-on stands twice daily, the registered worker would receive a guaranteed weekly maintenance of 50s. The scheme would be financed by the transfer of unemployment contributions from State, employers and workers to a special fund which would be administered by the National Joint Committee for Dock Labour. The Inquiry revived resistance amongst sections of the workforce to reform, with the Glasgow Docks Branch of the TGWU leading opponents of changes that involved, in Bullock's words, 'more organisation and less freedom'.⁴⁷

The Glasgow Branch strongly opposed national registration. On the Clyde Union organisation was already strong enough to allow branch officials complete control over the supply and deployment of dock labour. Adherence to a national scheme would oblige the Glasgow Branch to share this control jointly with employers' representatives. In 1929, along with dockers in Aberdeen, the Glasgow men duly established the Anti-Registration League to protect these advantages, condemning registration as 'a mere instrument of discipline and coercion'.⁴⁸ The Branch was in further dispute with the national leadership over the position of its eight full-time officials. According to the London leadership the eight were to be centrally appointed rather than locally elected, as the Branch insisted was its right. After the High Court in Edinburgh had found in the Glasgow men's favour, the Union Executive merely invited the 1931 Biennial Delegate Conference to reaffirm the constitutional position on permanent officials, namely that as Union employees they would continue to be appointed by the national leadership. The Clydesiders regarded these two issues, decasualisation and the assertion of national control, as an unwarranted assault on their authority. The struggle was partially resolved in 1932 with the secession of the Glasgow Branch, and the establishment of the Scottish Transport and General Workers Union. This was a further breach in the big Union's authority, for Bevin could not loosen the new body's grip on the Glasgow docks, and the STGWU was eventually admitted to the National Joint Council for Dock Labour in 1944.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Bullock, I, p.465.

⁴⁸Anti-Registration League resolution of 2 March 1930; quoted by Phillips and Whiteside, *op. cit.*, p.226.

⁴⁹Allen, *op.cit.*,pp.60-3; Bullock, I, pp.461-8.

The 'longue dureé' of the casual system had left an indelible mark on the docks, with the TGWU attempting with only limited success to organise a national, industrial workforce that was strongly characterised by local and sectional divisions, and a historical wariness of increased regulation. The full extent of these difficulties and the resistance to change would be revealed during the process of decasualisation begun during the Second World War, and concluded by the Labour Government in 1947.

WORLD WAR TWO AND THE IMMEDIATE ORIGINS OF THE 1947 SCHEME

The question of decasualisation in the docks, pressed only intermittently between the wars and extending only as far as the limited schemes of local registration, was brought urgently to the fore during the Second World War. The arrival of Ernest Bevin - the 'Dockers' KC' and a persistent advocate of labour reform in the ports - at the Ministry of Labour in May 1940, guaranteed that the momentum for change would receive substantial impetus. Equally important, however, were the circumstances of war which had brought the TGWU General Secretary into the Government. The urgent need to extract efficiently the nation's most precious wartime economic resource - manpower - was as important in the realisation of decasualisation as the Union's historical commitments to reform. As Angus Calder has suggested, however, it was typical of Bevin to make of such necessary materials the items of 'rough social justice'.⁵⁰

In June 1940, only weeks after assuming office, Bevin introduced the Dock Labour (Compulsory Registration) Order, which required all dockers to register and be available for transfer, as it was becoming increasingly necessary to move shipping from south and east coast ports to the west. As congestion built up in the ports of north-west England and the Clyde, the War Cabinet concluded that more stringent measures were required to reverse the dangerous delays in the turn-round of shipping. In December 1940 Bevin held talks with the Transport Workers' Acting General Secretary, Arthur Deakin, and his old comrade from Bristol - now on the Union's Docks Group executive - Dan Hillman. The three discussed a decasualisation scheme for the north-western ports, with Bevin also obtaining the approval of his erstwhile opponents in the STGWU for the extension of the measure to the Clyde. From March 1941 all registered dockers on the Clyde and the North Western

⁵⁰ Angus Calder, *The People's War*, p.269.

Approaches became employees of the Ministry of War Transport on a guaranteed weekly basis.⁵¹

The same month - March 1941 - saw the introduction of the Essential Work Order. This allowed the Minister of Labour to designate factories and other economic units as being engaged in essential national work. Under the Order, no worker employed in a place duly designated could resign or be sacked without permission from the Labour Ministry's local National Service Officer. In May 1941 Bevin notified the National Joint Council for Dock Labour - the body comprising representatives of port employers and trade unions - that he intended to bring all dockers outside the Ministry of War Transport Scheme under the Essential Work Order. The Minister requested that the industry itself provide a decasualisation programme. This initiative was of great long-term significance, for the scheme consequently worked out by the respective sides of industry would form the basis of the post-war framework of employment in the docks. The 1941 scheme was national in character, with a central corporation - the National Dock Labour Corporation Ltd - established to finance and administer its provisions. The Corporation comprised an equal number of representatives of employers and labour, with the Minister of Labour appointing an independent Chairman and Financial Director. The Corporation set up Local Boards - again, comprising equally the delegates of the industry's respective sides - to regulate the labour supply in the ports under its auspices. Under the new regime dock workers were obliged to attend the eleven weekly calls and to accept any work available. Those unable to find work on the stones would report to the Local Board's Manager, who might then allocate them to an employer in a different part of the docks, or even in a different port altogether. In return they were guaranteed maintenance, but failure to comply with the conditions would result in financial penalties or suspension - and in some cases dismissal - from the scheme. This was a curious mixture of casual and non-casual methods. Workers received their combined wages and maintenance payments once a week from the Port Labour Manager. He in turn received each week from employers the sums of money owed to the workers, whether they had been casually engaged or centrally allocated. The cost of the scheme was met by registered employers who were levied according to the size of their wages bills. The first local scheme, appropriately perhaps,

⁵¹Allen, *op.cit.*, pp.174-5; Bullock, *Volume II Minister of Labour 1940-1945*, pp.30-1. The ports of the North Western Approaches were Liverpool, Birkenhead, Manchester, Preston, Garston, Bromborough, Ellesmere Port, Partington, Widnes, Runcorn and Western Point.

given Bevin's West Country origins, was introduced in Bristol in December 1941. By February 1943 all but 1,000 dockers in the most marginal of the nation's ports were incorporated in either the Ministry of War Transport or the National Dock Labour Corporation Scheme.⁵²

It is worth re-emphasising that as Minister of Labour Bevin was centrally concerned with the efficient deployment of the nation's scarcest resource - labour. This principle clearly guided his actions on the docks no less than any other area of the industrial economy.⁵³ On 4 December 1941, as the Bristol Labour Board prepared to launch its scheme, the House of Commons debated a Government motion on the extension of the Essential Work Order. Bevin cited developments in the docks as an example of the Order's value to the war effort:

When we had to face the Battle of the Atlantic we had to do something quickly for Glasgow and Liverpool in order to help to hold the men. ... That scheme has reduced the time of turn-round of ships by nearly two-and-a-half days per ship on the average. That is equal to building nearly 1,500,000 tons of new shipping. The men and the scheme are entitled to the credit for this. Under the Order, I have established the Docks Corporation for all the other ports. This is an entirely new feature. Under this non-profit making corporation, a State-run company guaranteed by the Treasury, every man will be a permanent employee and will no longer be casual.⁵⁴

In activating decasualisation proposals that had long been TGWU policy, Bevin naturally enjoyed the support of his own union. The caretaker leadership was also at pains to share Bevin's stress on the need for maximum efficiency in the workplace. In October 1941 Deakin made this appeal in his Union's journal, the *Transport and General Workers' Record* : 'Every docker must know of ships which he helped to load or discharge, but which are now lying at the bottom of the sea. The tonnage available to carry our increasing requirements of essential food supplies and munitions of war is getting less ... it is therefore urgently necessary that we make the best possible use of every ship coming into port, securing the quickest possible turn-round and discharging or loading ...'.⁵⁵

Bevin's wartime efforts as Minister of Labour were not, of course, solely confined to maximising productivity. Accompanying the increased importance

⁵²Allen, op.cit., pp.175-6; Phillips and Whiteside, op.cit., p.241.

⁵³Bullock, II, 58.

⁵⁴*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.376, 1340, 4 December 1941.

⁵⁵*Transport and General Workers' Record*, October 1941.

of working people was a significant advance in their social and economic status. At the TUC Special Conference in May 1940, called to deliberate its position on participation in the wartime coalition, Bevin had said, 'if ... our class rise with all their energy and save the people, the country will always turn with confidence to the people who saved them ...'.⁵⁶ This hope was amply justified, at least so far as the trade unions were concerned; and the consequent recognition of manpower as the nation's primary economic resource was not without long-term social implications for the docks. The wartime schemes gave trade union representatives - as Bevin had anticipated when devising his decasualisation strategy between the wars - a new position of power in the industry, which they would be reluctant to forfeit once international hostilities had ceased. Deakin stated as much in October 1941, when passing comment on the character of the National Dock Labour Corporation: 'setting up as it does a form of workers' control, expressed through the trade union organisations acting jointly with representative employers, it may be regarded as a great experiment - the principle of which we may desire to retain.'⁵⁷ Bevin too was eager that these wartime gains should become a useful element in peacetime reconstruction. He had continued his House of Commons speech on the value of decasualisation in the docks by stating, 'I am rather proud of the development of this idea It is capable of being extended in post-war years to a large number of other industries without destroying initiative or enterprise. I believe both sides should accept it now as a permanent feature.'⁵⁸

During the negotiations on the long-term future of the industry which were conducted during the war, port employers indicated that they were much less enthusiastic than Bevin and the TGWU to countenance a permanent scheme on the lines of the war-time models. Due largely to the objections of employers' organisations, these negotiations yielded no positive results.⁵⁹ Perhaps less expected than these prevarications were signs that the TGWU might possibly encounter difficulties in securing the full compliance of their members in pursuing decasualisation. Rumblings of discontent in the docks were beginning to indicate that the workforce's historical ambivalence

⁵⁶Ernest Bevin, Special Conference of TU Executives 25 May 1940; quoted in Minkin, *op.cit.*, p.55.

⁵⁷*Transport and General Workers' Record*, October 1941.

⁵⁸*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.376, 1340, 4 December 1941.

⁵⁹Allen, *op.cit.*, p.177.

towards reform had not been removed at a stroke. Under the war-time schemes the Ministry of Labour recorded thirty-three separate dock strikes.⁶⁰

The nature of this discontent was discussed in the House of Commons, three years after the schemes had been introduced. On 5 May 1944 the Joint Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Transport, Philip Noel-Baker, restated decasualisation's invaluable contribution to the war effort. In response Walter Edwards, who as MP for Whitechapel represented many dockers and their families, pointed out that dockers had disproportionately borne the brunt of industrial transfers, and politely questioned whether all transfers had been completely necessary. Serious grievances, he added, were arising from the requirements of the new regime.⁶¹

This potential conflict was realised ten months later, when the largest dock strike of the war disrupted the Port of London. Involving over 10,000 dockers for a week from 1 March 1945, the stoppage ruffled sufficient feathers at the Ministry of Labour and National Service for an official inquiry into its origins to be established.⁶² This Inquiry subsequently noted that whilst 'the influence of a small subversive political section' had been brought to bear in the spreading of the strike, the stoppage had 'originated in the men's feelings of resentment against the alleged harsh exercise of discipline under the Port of London Dock Labour Scheme'. Significantly, the dispute had also recalled much earlier industrial struggles in London's Victoria Dock. Matters had been brought to a head, the official report noted, when the London Port Authority had attempted to move the control point from outside the Victoria Dock Gate to inside.⁶³ In November 1890 employers had terminated the practice won during the 1889 strike where workers were recruited outside the dock gates, causing much bitterness amongst the men and, in breaking the monopoly of the Dockers' Union, further weakening the long-term success of industrial unionism in the port.⁶⁴ In 1945 as much as 1890, the threatened transfer of the control point's location seemed to witness a potential strengthening of the employers' position at the workers' expense.

⁶⁰Ibid., p.185.

⁶¹*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.399, 1591-2 & 1662-5, 5 May 1944.

⁶²PRO: LAB 10/580, meeting at Ministry of Labour and National Service on 14 March 1945.

⁶³*Report of a Commission of Inquiry into the London Dock Dispute, March 1945. Ministry of Labour and National Service, 1945* (copy in PRO: LAB 10/580).

⁶⁴Lovell, *op.cit.*, pp.134-5.

The relationship between increased industrial discipline and growing industrial unrest was partly conceded by Victor Allen, Deakin's sympathetic biographer. Writing in 1957 Allen stated that, 'the strike indicated that the war-time schemes in certain instances might have been operating at the margin of the men's tolerance; that the cost of decasualisation to dockers in terms of liberty of action could outweigh the social and economic advantages.'⁶⁵ That tensions could arise when dockers judged decasualisation to have had a negative impact on their working lives, did not rest easily with Deakin's noted belief that the Dock Corporation scheme - under which the Port of London and 60 per cent of the national labour force was organised - represented a 'form of workers' control'. The outburst of these tensions in the March 1945 dispute can certainly be attributed to the workforce's frustration with wartime controls in a period when the end of the European war was in sight. However, decasualisation was at the heart of these controls, and with the Union and its political partners in the Labour Alliance determined that permanent decasualisation in the docks would be on the reconstruction agenda, the London strike plainly represented a word of warning with regard to post-war organisation.

TOWARDS THE POST-WAR SETTLEMENT, 1945-47

Post-war negotiations on the long-term future of the organisation of the port transport industry were protracted and tortuous. Throughout it was evident that there were fundamental differences between the positions of the unions and the employers. The Government, whilst maintaining a public position of non-intervention, privately exerted pressures consonant with its determination that a key industrial sector would not be surrendered to market forces at a time of immense national economic difficulty and international political instability.

Less than two weeks after being elected, the Government communicated its intentions to the industry. George Isaacs, the new Minister of Labour and National Service, wrote to the Chairman of the National Dock Labour Corporation, Lord Ammon, and indicated that a Bill for the peace-time decasualisation of dock labour was being drafted.⁶⁶ An Enabling Bill was duly

⁶⁵Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*, p.186.

⁶⁶PRO: BK 1/57, Isaacs to Ammon, 10 August 1945. For biographical information on George Isaacs (1883-1979), see George Eastwood, *George*

brought forward, the object of which was 'to enable permanent schemes to be made for ensuring greater regularity of employment for dock workers and securing that an adequate number of dock workers is available for the efficient performance of their work'.⁶⁷ The 1940-41 schemes had been introduced as important war effort tools, and the Labour Government was also anxious to portray decasualisation as central to its strategy for economic recovery. Introducing the Second Reading of the Enabling Bill on 12 November, Isaacs stated that if the wartime systems of decasualisation fell to the ground without being replaced, with the old casual order restored, 'the effect would be positively disastrous - disastrous to the industry, to the men and the country'. Clause 2 of the Bill allowed the Minister to introduce his own proposals for decasualisation if the industry itself failed to produce a scheme by 31 December 1946. Until new schemes had been introduced, the present ones would continue, with the Minister adamant that 'there shall be no period during which a port may be working without a scheme'.⁶⁸ Lest the House have been in any doubt as to the reasoning behind the Government's insistence on decasualisation, Isaacs' Parliamentary Secretary, Ness Edwards, reiterated later in the same debate that the national interest required an end to casual employment in the docks. 'We cannot afford', Edwards said, 'inefficiency in the docks, we cannot afford irregularity of work, we cannot afford a wasteful use of manpower in the dock industry. Manpower is going to be the bottleneck in this country in the future, and so we are anxious that this industry shall be put upon an efficient basis, and shall give regular, continuous and well-paid employment to those engaged in it'.⁶⁹ In February 1946 the Bill passed on to the statute book. A permanent scheme for decasualisation - whether produced

Isaacs. Isaacs gave up the Chair of the TUC to become Minister of Labour and National Service in 1945, a post he retained until replaced by Nye Bevan in January 1951. For Lord (Charles) Ammon (1873-1960), see the entry in *Dictionary of Labour Biography* I. Like Isaacs, 'Charlie' Ammon had enjoyed a long career as a trade unionist and MP, before being created Baron Ammon in 1944, when he became chairman of the National Dock Labour Corporation. Chairman of the National Dock Labour Board from 1947-50, Ammon was also the Government Chief Whip in House of Lords from 1945-9. Both Isaacs and Ammon, as Morgan Phillips would surely have observed, were Methodists.

⁶⁷Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Bill, *Parliamentary Papers* 1945-46 Volume I.

⁶⁸*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.415, 1756-9, 12 November 1945.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 1816-17.

by the industry or the Ministry itself - would be put in place by Statutory Order by 30 June 1947.⁷⁰

The Government legislation was, of course, intended as a fillip to the negotiations which the National Joint Council of the Port Transport Industry was conducting on its peace-time future. These negotiations can be interpreted as falling into three recognisable phases. The first period began in September 1945 with the workpeople submitting a claim for improved pay and conditions, and ended in December with the settlement of this claim and the passage through Parliament of the decasualisation legislation. The second period comprised the calendar year 1946, in which the NJC failed to break its deadlock on negotiations and the Minister of Labour published his own draft scheme, in accordance with the Dock Workers Act, as consequence. The closing phase covered the first six months of 1947, in which the Government considered objections from the respective sides of industry to this draft, before the Dock Labour Scheme was launched on 1 July.

The first period of talks was complicated by events arising from a claim for improved wages and working conditions which the workpeople's side communicated to the employers' side of the National Joint Council on 3 September. At the core of this programme, the 'Dockers' Charter', was the demand for an increase in the daily guaranteed wage from 16s to 25s.⁷¹ The NJC gathered on 27 September, but it broke up without progress, the employers arguing - not altogether plausibly - that they had not had sufficient time since 3 September to prepare their response.⁷² The employers' organisation, the National Association of Port Employers, privately discussed its reluctance to negotiate on the workpeople's terms a few days later, concluding that in an era of decasualisation there was no room for an advance on 16s per day.⁷³ The employers communicated this premise to the unions at subsequent NJC gatherings. On the 6 and 7 November NJC meetings, the unions stated a willingness to settle wages first, and treat other questions at a later date. The employers rejected this however, noting in their own minutes that 'the wages claim could not be dealt with in isolation, but must be related to the industrial

⁷⁰Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act 1946. *Public General Statutes 1946*.

⁷¹MRC/MSS.126 T&G/4/1/25, TGWU General Executive Council Report, 1945-46, Appendix IV: Docks Group Review.

⁷²*Transport and General Workers' Record*, November 1945.

⁷³London Museum Library/London Wharfingers' Association archive (hereafter LML/LWA), Box 57; NAPE Executive Committee, 4 October 1945.

conditions as these emerged from the proposals for decasualisation and reorganisation of the industry; only thus would it be possible to assess correctly the value of the standard basic rate of wages.⁷⁴ This hard line reflected, of course, the traditional parsimony of port employers.⁷⁵ It was a position also strongly influenced, however, by the recent and massive unofficial dock strike. This had involved nearly half the national workforce, lasted for the entire month of October and had cost the industry more than one million working days.⁷⁶ The stoppage essentially had cautioned the employers against making any concessions to the workpeople's side of the NJC before the union leaders concerned had re-established authority within their own ranks.

Despite the predictably adverse response of the port employers, the strike positively affected the pattern and outcome of the 1945 negotiations. On the morning of the Enabling Bill's Second Reading, Ernest Bevin wrote to George Isaacs, offering some interesting thoughts on the general situation. Following 'some discreet inquiries', presumably with his TGWU colleagues, the Foreign Secretary wished to advise the Minister that the wages question was causing immense contention in the docks. If it could only be settled and an instrument put in place for the maintenance of the war-time schemes, then the Minister and the industry would enjoy a far more peaceful environment in which to consider 'the more difficult side of the problem', that of permanent decasualisation.⁷⁷ That afternoon Isaacs duly indicated in the House that the existing schemes would not lapse until they had been replaced with permanent measures, and on 29 November he appointed Justice Evershed under the 1896 Conciliation Act to consider the merits of the port employees' official pay claim. Evershed's Committee duly recommended that the daily minimum be increased to 19s, 1s more than the employers' final offer and 6s less than the workpeople's original claim.⁷⁸ A National Docks' Delegate Conference accepted the Evershed findings on 14 December,⁷⁹ whilst four days earlier the NAPE executive endorsed them as, 'in the circumstances', the best available.⁸⁰

⁷⁴Ibid., NAPE EC, 19 November 1945.

⁷⁵Phillips and Whiteside, *op.cit.*, pp.55-7.

⁷⁶Below, chapter 3 'The 'Dockers' Charter' Strike, October 1945'.

⁷⁷PRO: FO 800/491, Bevin to Isaacs, 12 November 1945.

⁷⁸PRO: BK 1/85, Evershed Committee of Investigation, November-December 1945.

⁷⁹MRC/MSS.126 T&G/4/1/25, TGWU General Executive Council Report, 1945-46, Appendix IV: Docks Group Review.

⁸⁰LML/LWA 57; NAPE EC meeting, 10 December 1945.

With Evershed arbitrating the wage dispute in a manner not wholly unsatisfactory to each party - the union gaining a settlement independent of decasualisation and the 19s daily minimum being but 1s above the employers' final offer - the second phase of negotiations began. The 1946 talks on the permanent scheme for decasualisation were largely fruitless, however, with the employers and the TGWU holding irreconcilable positions on two important issues. Firstly, whilst the employers insisted that they be invested with monopoly control over local schemes, the TGWU held out for a national scheme under joint administration. Secondly, the two sides could not agree upon the basis of the workforce's guaranteed maintenance.

The first point of divergence had been raised at the 18 October National Joint Council, when Sir Douglas Ritchie, the NAPE chairman, insisted that the right of employers to sole control of the employment registers was a point of 'fundamental' importance.⁸¹ Following several months of inconclusive debate, the NAPE secretary, A.F. Macdonald, indicated the sum of the employers' position on administration of the schemes in a letter to the TGWU Docks Secretary, Jack Donovan. Firstly, noted Macdonald, the employers were opposed to the notion of a national controlling body, as the National Joint Council already provided sufficient central direction. Secondly, they were determined to resist the imposition of joint administrative control; as employers were to finance the schemes it would be inappropriate for unions to have a hand in their administration. This should instead be vested in existing Port Authorities.⁸²

The interests of the Port Authorities were, as Victor Allen has pointed out, synonymous with those of employers. Under no circumstances, therefore, could the TGWU allow the employers to exert what would, effectively, have been 'unilateral control'.⁸³ The Union was determined to maintain in peacetime the national system of joint industrial control which had been gained in 1941. Donovan had stated this at the first meeting of the NJC's Decasualisation Sub-Committee on 20 March 1946, before adding some remarks on the second point of controversy. Having visited the districts to gather the thoughts of members, he was convinced that the employers' proposals on the form of guarantee were also unacceptable.⁸⁴ The Union argued that dockers should be

⁸¹Ibid., NAPE EC, 25 October 1945.

⁸²PRO: MT 81/16, Macdonald to Donovan, 8 July 1946.

⁸³Allen, *op.cit.*, p.180.

⁸⁴PRO: BK 1/57, NJC/PTI Decasualisation Sub-Committee, 20 March 1946.

paid 6s for each half-day that they proved attendance but received no work. At the end of each week, the worker's attendance money and earnings from normal working hours would be made up to a minimum sum of £4 16s. The employers' position was that all earnings, including piece-work and overtime, were to be reckoned against the guarantee, and that this maintenance would comprise a lunar monthly guarantee of £16.⁸⁵

Macdonald's letter to Donovan at the start of July effectively acknowledged that the gap between the two sides on administrative control and the guarantee would not be bridged. On 23 August the NJC informed Isaacs of their failure to conclude an agreed scheme, indicating the two central points of controversy.⁸⁶ Isaacs's cautious response was to appoint a Committee of Inquiry under Sir John Forster KC, which heard evidence from each side of the NJC before publishing its conclusions in December. On the two pressing questions Forster found largely in favour of the TGWU's position: the scheme would be a national one under joint administrative control; and dock workers would be paid for each half-day that their attendance at the call stand was not rewarded with work.⁸⁷

THE CHARACTER OF THE 1947 SCHEME

The final phase of the approach to peace-time decasualisation duly began with the Ministry of Labour preparing a draft scheme in December 1946 along the lines drawn up by Forster. Overall administration of the scheme was to be vested in a National Dock Labour Board which would appoint local Dock Labour Boards to oversee affairs in each port or group of ports. These boards would, both nationally and locally, be under joint jurisdiction. The National Board was to consist of ten members, four from each side of industry with an independent chair and vice-chair. The Local Boards - on which there would be no such independent representation - were to be responsible for disciplinary matters and the allocation of labour within ports. Those workers not assigned an employer on each day comprised a reserve pool of labour, held to be in the

⁸⁵PRO: MT 81/16, Robert Letch (Port of London Authority) to Aubrey Clark (Ministry of Transport), 26 June 1946.

⁸⁶*Transport and General Workers' Record*, September 1946.

⁸⁷MRC/MSS.126 T&G/4/1/25, TGWU General Executive Council Report, 1945-46, Appendix IV: Docks Group Review.

employ of the Board, and paid an attendance fee on a half-daily basis.⁸⁸ Such provision, with a majority of workers still likely to be engaged by foremen at the call stands, represented a significant qualification to the notion of a 'decasualisation' scheme. Although the war-time 'continuity' regulations were maintained, which required dockers to complete any job to which they had been assigned and so prevented foremen hiring labour by the half-day alone, in a sense dock workers were still casual employees. Paradoxically, whilst bound by the disciplinary requirements of regular employment, dockers did not enjoy the compensation of the full economic security which regular employment would bring. Indeed, a later official investigation into the docks industry concluded that to term the 1947 measure a 'decasualisation scheme' was misleading.⁸⁹ At heart the Scheme was, as the TUC recognised four decades later, *'like its (wartime) predecessors, primarily concerned with the efficient operation of the labour force'*. To that end, therefore, it was drawn up so that it could continue to impose upon the dockers the disciplinary framework necessary to efficiency. In accepting this framework, the dockers surrendered something they greatly valued.⁹⁰

Although these problems were not immediately apparent in 1947, Isaacs's draft naturally elicited quite different responses from the respective sides of industry. For the TGWU its appearance was a fitting climax to its twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations in January 1947. The special glossy-covered Silver Jubilee issue of the *Transport and General Workers' Record*, complete with full page portraits of Bevin and Deakin, proclaimed 'THE LONG FIGHT FOR DECASUALISATION ENDS IN VICTORY.'⁹¹ The employers' reaction could not have been in greater contrast. With both sides of the industry invited to lodge their observations on and objections to the Ministerial draft with the Ministry of Labour, the NAPE fought a bitter, rearguard struggle. Sending a copy of his organisation's objections to the National Dock Labour Corporation on 12 April, Macdonald wrote of the employers' 'profound disagreement with the intention that its [ie the Scheme's] administration should be entrusted to a national body, with local agencies, on which the Trade Unions would have equal representation with the Employers'. Macdonald and

⁸⁸ Allen, *op.cit.*, pp.183-6, provides an excellent summary of the administrative mechanics of the Dock Labour Scheme.

⁸⁹ *Port Transport Industry. Report of a Committee of Inquiry* (Cmd. 9813, 1956).

⁹⁰ Delay, *op. cit.* Original emphasis.

⁹¹ *Transport and General Workers' Record*, January 1947.

his colleagues were particularly concerned about the implications of union officials fulfilling 'certain of the functions which belong to management, and thus [imposing] on them duties which are alien to their office and must on occasion be irreconcilable with the natural demands of their constituents'.⁹²

The employers' misgivings were rejected by two separate Committees of Inquiry which were appointed to hear the industry's objections to the Ministerial draft. The Cameron Inquiry, which ran for six days from 14 May 1947, into the nature of the Scheme's administration, and the Hetherington Inquiry of 19 May 1947 into the amount and basis of calculation of the guarantee, both endorsed Isaacs's general principles.⁹³ The Scheme was duly put into operation, as scheduled in the 1946 Dock Workers Act, by Statutory Order. With a veteran of the 1929 Labour Government as its chairman, Lord Ammon, the National Dock Labour Board assumed its duties from the 1 July. The Board posted large notices around the nation's ports informing the workforce of the impending changes, and placed adverts to the same effect in the national press on the days 27-30 June.⁹⁴

During the period of deliberation permitted by the Draft Order, the employers' organisation had not been the sole source of opposition to the proposed Scheme. Two other voices had expressed dissatisfaction with the Scheme: the one privately and the other publicly. In February an unsigned Ministry of Transport internal memorandum expressed doubts about the proposed form of administration. This was modelled on that of the National Dock Labour Corporation, a body characterised, according to the memo, by an unwillingness to take decisions 'unpalatable' to either side of the industry. The new Scheme offered 'no improvement' on this matter. What was required was 'an independent element as strong numerically as either of the other elements'.⁹⁵ Senior Transport Ministry civil servants took up this line in opposition to the Ministry of Labour, as the latter department prepared recommendations for the National Dock Labour Board's two independent members, the Chair and Vice-Chair. Aubrey Clark, Assistant Secretary at the

⁹²PRO: MT 81/16, Macdonald to Saunders, 12 April 1947.

⁹³PRO: BK 1/61; summary of Cameron's conclusions, 14-23 May 1947; copy of Hetherington's conclusions, 4 June 1947.

⁹⁴PRO: BK 1/61; the adverts, at a total cost of £320 11s, were placed in *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Herald*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Worker*, *Financial Times*, *News Chronicle*, *Reynolds' News*, *Sunday Dispatch* and *Journal of Commerce*.

⁹⁵PRO: MT 81/16, unsigned Ministry of Transport memorandum, 'Comments on draft scheme', 15 February 1947.

Transport Ministry's Docks and Canals Division, complained to his superior on 15 July that the Ministry of Labour had declined to supplement the NDLB with two additional independent members to balance the four from each side of the industry.⁹⁶

Significantly, this would not be the last occasion on which the Ministries of Transport and Labour would cross swords on the Dock Scheme. Two years later, following large unofficial strikes in both 1948 and 1949, Transport Ministry officials restated the opinion that their Ministry of Labour colleagues had been mistaken in allowing the unions to share control of the Scheme's administration. This position implied that the Ministry of Labour had conceded too much ground to the TGWU.⁹⁷ The young MP who became Parliamentary Private Secretary at the MoT in 1947, James Callaghan, has recorded in his memoirs that 'Shipowners had great influence with the Ministry of Transport shortly after the war,'⁹⁸ and Clark's frustration, just two weeks after the NDLB had begun going about its business, certainly illustrates the sympathies detected by the Parliamentary Secretary. 'I should have thought', Clark wrote, 'that the employers, at least, would have taken the view that a strong independent representation would help ensure that the dock labour scheme was administered with due regard to economic and commercial considerations ...'.⁹⁹ This theme, that union representatives on the NDLB were, unlike independents and employers, incapable of distinguishing what was in the best interests of the port transport industry and the economic life of the nation, would be restated in subsequent MoT observations on developments in the docks. On these occasions Clark and his colleagues would not seek support from employers in vain.

As well as tensions within Whitehall, the introduction of the Scheme also revealed the divisions which organised labour was prone to, in the Port of London at least. In the week preceding the Cameron Inquiry which began on 14 May, a pamphlet was circulated in the Port of London by an unofficial body of dock workers, the National Portworkers' Defence Committee. Predicting that the six-day Inquiry would be a 'farce in six acts', the Committee proclaimed its willingness to strike in favour of a seven-point programme which included the introduction of one daily call, the election of NDLB officials and the

⁹⁶PRO: MT 63/408, Clark to Page, 15 July 1947.

⁹⁷Below, pp.155-56.

⁹⁸James Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, p.95.

⁹⁹PRO: MT 63/408, Clark to Page, 15 July 1947.

immediate nationalisation - without compensation - of the nation's docks, ports, harbours and canals.¹⁰⁰

The existence of this unofficial committee reflected the historical problems of official organisation in the dock industry. Unofficial leadership, which had first challenged the TGWU as early as 1923, re-emerged after the war during the Dockers' Charter strike of October 1945. The committees then established in various ports around Britain were never formally constituted, and only remained active so long as a significant dispute in the docks existed, but they reflected the historical impatience of port workers with procedures and regulations and their consequent willingness to explore solutions to these grievances through unofficial channels. The unofficial movement appeared in various guises between 1945 and 1951. Despite styling itself in May 1947 as a National Committee, its activities on this occasion appear to have been confined to the Port of London. Within the vast docks of the capital, however, the unofficial movement's base was fairly broad. During the unofficial strike in 1948 - and there is little reason to suspect that the situation in 1947 would have been appreciably different - its representatives were drawn from all of the four main systems: London, Surrey, West and East India and Millwall, and the Royals. Moreover, whilst predominantly composed of TGWU members, the movement also included members of the Stevedores Union.¹⁰¹ Given the thorny relationship between the official leaders of the respective unions, this was an interesting example of industrial organisation. As such it was a source of tension within the Stevedores Union as well as the TGWU.

The National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union prized its separate identity, which it had protected by refusing to join the TGWU in 1922. The NASD's tiny membership - about 7,000 as compared to a Transport Workers' Docks Group membership that exceeded 80,000 - was an indication of this sectionalism. It was also a source of anxiety for the Stevedores' leadership, which feared that it would be swallowed by its much larger rival. The leadership was a jealous protector of its privileges and members. For the General Secretary of the Union, Richard Barrett, this required tight discipline from his members. Any contravention of the industry's constitutional

¹⁰⁰MRC/MSS.15B/40, Frank Maitland deposit; National Portworkers' Defence Committee, *The Enquiry and YOU!*, May 1947. Frank Maitland was an ILP activist and journalist.

¹⁰¹PRO: LAB 10/783, 'Personnel of "No Name" Organisation', June 1948.

machinery would diminish the Stevedores' position as a credible force in the docks.

Barrett expressed his respect for constitutional propriety during the Cameron Inquiry hearings. On 13 May at a meeting of the Union's Stevedores Sectional Committee, Barrett's attention was brought to the activities of one of his Dock Branch secretaries, Bert Aylward. Aylward had circulated, on official branch notepaper, a notice in the Surrey Dock which threatened to establish a strike committee in opposition to the mooted Scheme.¹⁰² This mirrored the position of the National Portworkers' Defence Committee. Although Aylward's precise role in this committee in 1947 is uncertain, at the very least he must have liaised with its Surrey representatives. He was certainly also active on the unofficial strike committee during the 'Zinc Oxide' dispute of June 1948.¹⁰³ Clearly Aylward was determined to match the unofficial committee's opposition to the 'farce' of the Cameron Inquiry by assuming an unheralded role during its first act. When Barrett arrived at the Ministry of Labour on 14 May for the hearing, he encountered Aylward on the steps outside. As the Inquiry began, with Aylward in attendance, Barrett informed Cameron that only he and Hern, his Dockers' Sectional Secretary, were entitled to represent the NASD. On the advice of the chair Aylward agreed to withdraw, and the Inquiry was thus prevented from officially recording the views of the unofficial opposition. It would appear however, that Aylward lingered in Whitehall long enough to confront Barrett and Hern with verbal abuse outside the Ministry during the lunch-time recess, and at a subsequent meeting of the Stevedores' Executive Aylward was officially cautioned as to his future behaviour.¹⁰⁴ The episode indicated that even within the compact confines of the smaller union, tension with regard to the immediate future of the industry was felt.¹⁰⁵

There were then two very different critiques of the 1947 Scheme. On the one hand employers had expressed 'profound disagreement' with its

¹⁰²National Museum of Labour History (hereafter NMLH), NASD Stevedores Sectional Committee Minutes, 13 May 1947.

¹⁰³Below, pp. 108-09.

¹⁰⁴NMLH/NASD Joint Executive Council Minutes, 15 May and 11 June 1947.

¹⁰⁵According to Mr Andrew Flinn, who is sorting the NASD files at the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester, it is very difficult to obtain biographical information about either Barrett or Aylward. Barrett remained General Secretary until the 1960s, whilst Aylward was briefly the Dockers' Sectional Secretary in the 1950s. A letter from Aylward to Barrett during the 1954 dock strike, which resulted in the NASD's expulsion from the TUC under the Bridlington Agreement after it had recruited TGWU members, suggests that the two men did at times work closely together.

administrative mechanisms, an observation shared by at least two very senior figures in the Ministry of Transport. The shipowners' gazette, *Fairplay Weekly Shipping Journal*, frankly stated the type of views which Macdonald and Clark had been expressing, albeit more subtly, in private. 'Decasualisation', ran its editorial, 'is a blessed word which, like Mesopotamia and democracy, can mean different things to different people, and thus add to the confusion.' For employers decasualisation implied continuity of employment for those qualified, provided there was a sufficient supply of trade. Some employees, however, interpreted the Scheme as guaranteeing continuity of payment with actual employment a secondary consideration. This latter assumption was held by the journal to exist 'largely because of a flood of sentimental twaddle about the "rights" of Man, which rights are represented as the workers' due by noisy folk whose jaws are their hardest working member and to whom unearned income is only to be reprobated in the "idle rich"'.¹⁰⁶

On the other hand, there were the doubts and objections of the National Portworkers' Defence Committee, and individuals such as Bert Aylward. Their concerns indicated a degree of unofficial cross-union action that struck a clear contrast with the frosty official relations between the TGWU and the NASDU. It is important also to remember that after the extremely harsh winter of 1947, many dockers needed little rousing from 'noisy' unofficial leaders: they had been working all winter in formidably arduous conditions, with cranes frozen in the docks and the thaw only recently completed by the middle of May.¹⁰⁷ Many may well have had cause to sympathise with the unofficial leaders who evidently believed that the Scheme did not go nearly far enough in eliminating the power of private enterprise, and who voiced a willingness to back this sentiment up with strike action.

These opposing views, and the bases of support from which they had sprung, would reappear on more than one occasion during the Dock Labour Scheme's difficult early years. However, the alliance of Government Ministers and TGWU officials had few misgivings about the Scheme. They largely accepted that the structure of the National Dock Labour Board was consonant with Deakin's characterisation of its war-time predecessor, the National Dock Labour Corporation, as 'a form of workers' control, expressed through the trade union organisations acting jointly with representative employers'. Of

¹⁰⁶*Fairplay Weekly Shipping Journal*, 15 May 1947, clipping in PRO: T 228/168.

¹⁰⁷Jack Dash, *Good Morning, Brothers!*, p.60.

greater significance to the both sides of the alliance was the economic lever which the Scheme bestowed them at a time of immense economic difficulty. During the 1946 port transport industry's joint council negotiations, Jack Donovan had emphasised decasualisation's role in obtaining the increase in exports necessary to recovery.¹⁰⁸ Lord Ammon frequently confirmed Labour's economic as well as social and political commitment to decasualisation. Speaking at the sixth Annual General Meeting of the Corporation in June 1946, for instance, Ammon stated of the ports that such 'an important fact of our National Economy cannot be subject to the caprice of local enterprise.'¹⁰⁹ In 1947, the year of the Scheme's introduction, as a result of intensified economic pressure, the docks assumed an even greater strategic importance. On 5 June the National Dock Labour Corporation held its final AGM, just four weeks before its functions were to be assumed by the new National Dock Labour Board. Two important speeches were made: the first by Lord Ammon who was to chair the NDLB as he had the NDLC, and the second by Ernest Bevin. Ammon observed, gratefully, that employers and employees had by now accepted the importance of turning shipping around as rapidly as possible, stating that he could not 'stress too heavily, how vitally urgent it is to see that our ships are at sea and not lying idle in the ports; that is absolutely essential if the flow of raw materials we so urgently need for our workshops is to be maintained, if sufficient exports are to reach overseas markets, and indeed if the national production programme is to be realised'. Bevin spoke of how the war-time schemes had succeeded in maintaining the labour supply, and now called upon the new Scheme, as Ammon had done, to speed the turn-round of North Atlantic shipping. 'What I am putting to you', he said, 'is really our national survival.' The audience of trade unionists and employers was also told: 'you dug for victory in the war; now dig for dollars now.'¹¹⁰ The theme was taken up by the Union in the wake of the autumn sterling crisis which precipitated the appointment of the new Chancellor. With Cripps arguing in Cabinet that recovery was dependent on increased exports along with a counter-inflationary incomes policy,¹¹¹ the Transport Workers urged their dock

¹⁰⁸PRO: BK 1/57, NJC Decasualisation Sub-Committee, 20 March 1946.

¹⁰⁹PRO: BK 1/151, Chairman's speech to the NDLC's sixth AGM, 27 June 1946.

¹¹⁰PRO: BK 1/153, Ammon and Bevin speeches to the NDLC's seventh AGM, 5 June 1947.

¹¹¹PRO: CAB 128/CM(47)87, 13 November 1947.

members to 'help the country out of its present difficulties' by doing everything possible to eliminate delays in the turn-round of ships.¹¹²

The following three chapters will separately discuss the unofficial dock strikes of October 1945, June 1948 and April-July 1949. Each of the three disputes can be understood in terms of the peculiar heritage which decasualisation between 1940 and 1947 failed to uproot. Dock workers, whilst historically given to spontaneous outbursts of militant strike action, had never been fully immersed in the culture of the Trade Union movement. The central pillars of labour movement culture, loyalty to trade union leaders and solidarity with other groups of trade unionists and the Labour Party, did not always command the attention of dock workers. Their loyalty and undoubted occupational solidarity were instead expressed at a more immediate level, with neighbours and work-mates in the dock communities. The TGWU, established on shaky foundations in 1922, had not fully resolved the two outstanding conflicts - local versus national and sectional versus industrial. The quest for a solidly organised Union, commanding authority amongst dock workers nationally and industrially, was as elusive to Arthur Deakin as it had been to Ernest Bevin.

These chapters will also bring out the collision between this long history and immediate post-war developments, with the strikes of 1948 and 1949 unfolding against an appreciably different background from that of 1945. The year 1947 marked the coming-together of a number of factors that would influence the Labour Government's response to strike action in the port transport industry. In the ports a Scheme had been introduced to honour the dignity of dock labour by guaranteeing its material maintenance, but which simultaneously sought economic rationalisation through increased discipline of the workforce, backed up by the pledge that a strike against the Scheme would be taken as a challenge to the Government's authority. In maintaining on a permanent footing the loss of freedoms which dockers had enjoyed under casualism, decasualisation seemed in some respects to mark a deterioration in the cultural quality of the dock workers' existence. Meanwhile, beyond the docks, Attlee and his Ministers, supported by the TUC General Council, were increasingly occupied by the central problems of domestic - and European - economic recovery, and the international - and domestic - resistance to communism. From 1948 onwards, these vital issues of the period increasingly shaped the Government's reasoning on the port transport industry. These

¹¹²*Transport and General Workers' Record*, November 1947.

three chapters therefore illuminate the stresses which the labour alliance was subject to as a result of the preoccupation - on the part of Government and Trade Union leaders alike - with economic recovery and the seemingly ubiquitous disruption of international communism.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DOCKERS' CHARTER STRIKE, OCTOBER 1945

THE STRIKE WHICH HISTORIANS FORGOT?

In July 1945 the Labour Government inherited a ten week old industrial dispute in the docks over pay and conditions. Since May dockers had been on strike at various times in Glasgow, in the Humber ports of Grimsby and Immingham, in Swansea and in Cardiff. At each port Churchill's caretaker administration had deployed troops to unload cargoes. In London throughout July dockers had been operating a go-slow, and on 25 July 600 troops were prepared for deployment in the Surrey Docks. On 31 July, only five days after the election of the first ever majority Labour Government, Clement Attlee ordered these troops to unload several of the ships affected by the go-slow, and on 13 August the go-slow was called off.¹ Given the remarkable persistence of industrial unrest in the docks in the six years which followed - as a contemporary observer noted, dockers struck work between six and seven times more often than the traditionally more militant coal miners² - this initial episode was of immense significance, yet has largely been neglected by historians.

The go-slow revealed considerable dissatisfaction in the docks with existing pay and conditions. This dissatisfaction was the basis of far more serious trouble which erupted in the docks less than two months later, when the Government confronted the largest single industrial dispute of the 1945-51 period. The 'Dockers' Charter' strike lasted for forty-one days from 24 September to 4 November, involved approximately 50,000 dockers - a majority of the national dock workforce - and cost the industry a total of 1,107,000 working days.³ Despite its obvious magnitude, even this strike has commanded little attention in the general histories of the 1945 Government. Kenneth O. Morgan offers a single sentence on the strike, which is one more than Henry

¹Steve Peak, *Troops in Strikes*, pp.83-8.

²Kenneth Knowles, 'The Post-War Dock Strikes', *Political Quarterly* Vol. XXII, 266 (1951).

³PRO: LAB 34/60, Trade Disputes (All Industries), 1945. Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, notes that 14,260,000 days were lost to strikes in the seven calendar years 1945-51, pp.261-3.

Pelling, who neglects to mention it at all.⁴ Morgan's presentation of industrial unrest in the docks is, nevertheless, extremely interesting. He concentrates in slightly greater detail on the 1948 and 1949 strikes which are discussed in chapters four and five of this thesis. The 1949 dispute, which involved unofficial action in a limited number of British ports by workers who refused to discharge ships that were subject to a Canadian industrial dispute, is characterised by Morgan as the 'most serious crisis on the industrial relations front' encountered by Attlee's ministers.⁵ Perhaps this judgement is based on the tense economic and ideological atmosphere prevailing in 1949. It may also reflect the weight of Whitehall's concern in 1949 which was the consequence of this atmosphere: it is no mere curiosity that the Public Records Office holds a more abundant official correspondence on the 1949 strike than the one in 1945. Yet in fact only 406,000 working days were lost during the 1949 strike, rendering it quantitatively less than half the size of the 1945 strike.⁶

During a recent BBC Radio 4 series in which the political journalist and historian, Anthony Howard, followed 'the chequered history of the Trade Union Movement since the Second World War', the 1945 dock strike was ignored altogether. Howard argued that the Labour Government initially encountered little significant industrial unrest, with the establishment of full employment and the welfare state guaranteeing that 'all was quiet on the industrial front'. Once the euphoria of the 1945 victory and the initial achievements had worn off, however, the Government's work was increasingly disrupted by unofficial strike activity in a number of industries. For Howard, this 'trouble started in the London docks where a strike broke out in 1948.'⁷ This model of the 1945 Government's record is completely false. During the 1948 strike around 200,000 working days were lost, less than one-fifth of the October 1945 figure.⁸

These opening remarks are not intended to play down the importance - economic, ideological or otherwise - of the 1948 and 1949 strikes. But it must be emphasised that the most significant episode in the relationship between the Labour Government and the docks did take place early in the 1945 Government's life. The vast dock strike, which took place in defiance of the

⁴Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-1951*, p.373; Henry Pelling, *The Labour Governments 1945-51*.

⁵Morgan, *op.cit.*, p.375.

⁶PRO: LAB 34/64, Trade Disputes (All Industries), 1949.

⁷Anthony Howard, 'Brothers', broadcast BBC Radio 4, 5 January 1993.

⁸PRO: LAB 34/63, Trade Disputes (All Industries), 1948.

Transport and General Workers' Union leadership, indicated the troubled history of the Union's attempts to organise a national and industrial workforce across local and sectional barriers. It also revealed the extreme pressures bearing down upon Keir Hardie's 'Great Alliance' at the very moment of its supreme triumph.

A LIST OF UNION 'FAILURES' ? THE TGWU AND THE STRIKE

The national and unofficial strike of port workers in October 1945 ostensibly began with a piece-rate dispute at Birkenhead on the Mersey on 24 September. A group of sixty-one men was deployed to discharge a cargo of pit props. The company involved was not, apparently, a member of the local Employers' Association, and therefore there existed no agreed rate for the cargo. The company refused negotiations with the local TGWU officials, preferring instead to refer the matter to the Ministry of Supply. Owing to this delay, the men involved requested that they be allowed to return to the labour pool. This was rejected by the Port Labour Superintendent, and the rest of the Birkenhead men struck work in support of the sixty-one. At this point the Port Labour Superintendent refused a second request, this time from 360 Liverpool men working temporarily in Birkenhead. These men asked for the return of their work books, in order to leave the strike-bound west bank of the Mersey to seek employment back in Liverpool.⁹ The Superintendent's second decision caused the strike to spread throughout the Mersey system, with 13,000 of the area's 18,000 workers on strike by 3 October.¹⁰ A local TGWU official noted that the plight of the 360 bookless men had been crucial to the development of the stoppage. As he stated, if 'these books had not been impounded and if the Liverpool men had been able to obtain work on their return to Liverpool there would have been no strike.'¹¹

On 5 October the TGWU National Docks Trade Group Committee Secretary, Jack Donovan, arrived in Liverpool to conduct the negotiations personally. On the following day an agreement was struck with the Regional Port Director that apparently resolved the difficulties raised in the initial dispute. The sixty-one men could re-enter the reserve labour pool and be available for work,

⁹'The Facts About the Dock Strike', *Transport and General Workers' Record*, November 1945.

¹⁰*The Times*, 4 October 1945.

¹¹*Manchester Guardian*, 4 October 1945.

negotiations to fix pit-prop rates at Birkenhead would proceed, and the 360 Liverpool men working at Birkenhead were to receive attendance money from the date of the strike starting in Birkenhead until the date when Liverpool became involved.¹² Whilst these negotiations were nearing conclusion, however, the unofficial committee which the strikers had established to co-ordinate their action, was making less conciliatory noises. Frank Campbell, the committee's chairman, pledged the unofficial strike's continuation and indicated that there was more to the stoppage than the disagreements which Donovan was in town to resolve. On the day of the National Secretary's arrival, Campbell said, 'We are not prepared to listen to the dictates of the Transport and General Workers' Union. For twenty years we have been dictated to by them. We know that the union has been arbitrating on our behalf, but I challenge the union to state the dockers' case.'¹³

Within a week of these remarks unofficial strike committees had been established at all the main dock groups in the country, including London and Glasgow. Work was also disrupted at Dundee, Garston, Hull, Grimsby and Immingham, Leith, Manchester, Preston, Sunderland and West Hartlepools.¹⁴ By 12 October, according to official Ministry of Labour and National Service returns, over 40,000 dockers were on strike. Peaking at 45,720 on 24 October, the daily strike total exceeded 40,000 on every day until the men returned on 4 November, excepting 18 October when it dipped only marginally, to 39,823.¹⁵

A strike of this scale and length was not, of course, attributable to the actions of the Mersey management. Rather it drew upon the issue of pay and conditions which had informed the sporadic unofficial action earlier in the year, and the traditional ambivalence with which dock workers regarded their trade union leaders. The unofficial strike committees established in the various ports, starting with Liverpool, took the line that responsibility for the stoppage rested largely with the TGWU. The Union leadership, as Campbell implied, had failed to pursue improved pay and conditions with appropriate vigour. For the men on strike the trouble had begun in earnest not at Birkenhead on 24 September, but one month earlier in London at the Union's National Docks Delegate Conference.

¹²'The Facts About the Dock Strike', *Transport and General Workers' Record*, November 1945.

¹³*Manchester Guardian*, 5 October 1945.

¹⁴*The Times*, 9-12 October 1945.

¹⁵PRO: LAB 34/60, Trade Disputes (All Industries), 1945.

Held on 24 August, only eleven days after the termination of the London go-slow, the Conference formulated a wide-ranging and ambitious set of proposals as a basis for forthcoming negotiations with the National Association of Port Employers. The package quickly earned the nick-name, the 'Dockers' Charter', and as subsequent developments were to indicate, clearly captured the imagination of the dock workforce. The Union's package comprised six points:

- [1] An increased daily minimum from 16s to 25s.
- [2] Two weeks annual paid leave.
- [3] Payment for statutory holidays.
- [4] A reduced working week of 40 hours.
- [5] Retirement allowances for the aged and infirm.
- [6] The introduction of medical and other welfare services in all ports.

The Charter was duly approved on 31 August by the workpeople's side of the National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry,¹⁶ and communicated to the Employers' Association on 3 September. A meeting of the NJC was scheduled for the 27 September.¹⁷

Publicly the Transport Workers proclaimed the conference of 24 August and the adoption of the Charter as a great success. The union journal described it as 'one of the best docks conferences we have had in the Union.' A significant point of caution was added, however: 'We have recently had a number of serious disturbances in the industry and the delegate conference called upon members in the ports to place themselves under strict Union discipline, and that no independent action should be taken which may embarrass those who are responsible for conducting negotiations.'¹⁸

In private those 'responsible for conducting negotiations' were less happy with the package, particularly with regard to the 25 shillings figure, which had been adopted against the advice of the Docks Group Committee. The Docks Group Secretary, Jack Donovan, also believed that the Charter had been foisted upon the Committee by the conference as a result of a successful Communist-

¹⁶This body included delegates of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers' Union, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, and the Scottish Transport and General Workers' Union, as well as the TGWU.

¹⁷MRC/MSS.126 T&G/4/1/25, TGWU General Executive Council Report, 1945-46, Appendix IV, Docks Group Report 1945-6.

¹⁸*Transport and General Workers' Record*, September 1945.

orchestrated campaign. On 30 October Donovan offered the Committee the sum of his considerations:

This figure [25s] has become a slogan, and I am convinced that it had been circulated around the branches of the Union for many months prior to the Delegate Conference. It is significant that this figure of 25/- was contained in resolutions from various parts of the country in almost identical terms. We do know that in March this year, an outside body sent out a twelve-point questionnaire to various members of our Union employed in the Dock Industry, and asking that it be returned to the Unity Campaign Department at 16 King Street WC2.¹⁹

If Union leaders were impatient with their members' demands, the slow pace with which negotiations on the basis of the Charter proceeded also ensured that these members were impatient with their Union leaders. When the Docks' National Joint Council gathered to discuss the claim on 27 September, the employers argued that the 24 days since 3 September had been an insufficient period in which to consider their response. On 28 September the NJC was adjourned until 18 October, with the employers' executive privately asserting its determination to resist any advance on the 16s daily minimum, given the continuation of the wartime decasualisation schemes.²⁰

The Union later defended itself from criticism that it had done little to keep members informed on the progress of these negotiations, pointing out that a circular to all dock branches had been issued, containing details of the meeting held on 27 September.²¹ The national escalation of the strike which had begun on the Mersey indicated that many TGWU dock members were unhappy with the tolerance shown by their leaders, in allowing employers a further three weeks to prepare their case.

The large-scale unofficial strike was also evidence that the workforce was extremely unhappy with its material position. Dock workers had received no formal increase in their daily rate of pay since the aftermath of the Shaw Inquiry in 1921. The Shaw Inquiry had been held at the peak of the post-war boom, and the position of relative advantage from which Bevin had negotiated the daily minimum of 16s, had proved to be temporary. Guy Routh has demonstrated that, in the economy as a whole, wages tumbled rapidly between

¹⁹TGWU Docks National Trade Group Committee Minutes and Reports (hereafter DNTGC), 30 October 1945 (Transport House, London).

²⁰LML/LWA 57, National Association of Port Employers' Executive Committee Minutes, 4 October 1945.

²¹'The Facts About the Dock Strike', *Transport and General Workers' Record*, November 1945.

1921 and 1922. There followed a long period of gradual wage deflation, ending only with the inflationary upsurge - in wages and prices - of the Second World War. In 1945, according to Routh's calculations, average wage rates and the cost of living were almost identical to those of 1921.²²

Writing to the Minister of Labour, George Isaacs, once the strike was over, Ernest Bevin pointed out what the implications of these developments were for the dockers he had formerly represented. He observed that dockers had ridden the inflationary boom without having to rely on the daily minimum which he had negotiated more than two decades previously: 'the real bone of contention is of course the day worker and I think you should know how this becomes so acute. In a war the main work you are doing is either piece-work or special war work for which special rates are paid. But in peace-time when we get back to ordinary shipping, day work again becomes more prominent, especially in loading.'²³

However illusory the daily rate was in war-time, with this abundance of piece-rate and special-rate war work lifting average daily earnings well above the 16s minimum, it was apparent that circumstances might greatly alter as the gradual transition to peace-time conditions took place. Certainly the unofficial strike committees were keen to argue that the absence of a formal advance in the daily guarantee was unacceptable. Strike leaders in London gave pithy and colourful expression to their dissatisfaction over the related questions of pay and arduous working conditions:

16/- in 1920 - 16/- in 1945 - 16/- a day for what [sic.]. Humping Beef in a Frig. Ship 23 degrees freezing one day; sweating the next in a hold full of Sugar - sweat and sugar, acting like sandpaper on your back - a back covered with blood - coughing and spitting with cement and pepper. Working your fingers to the bone on ingots of lead and copper - discharging wet hides and smelling to high heaven - going home smothered with lamp black, red ochre and oil - subject to Asthma, Bronchitis, Rheumatism, Lumbago - with a constant stream of casualties to the hospitals.²⁴

During the strike itself constant references were made to the need for the immediate implementation of the Charter framed at the official August Delegate Conference. The London Central Strike Committee's 'mandate' for a return to work was almost identical to the Charter. In addition to the demand

²²Guy Routh, *Occupation and Pay in Britain 1906-79*, pp. 134-5.

²³PRO: FO 800/491, Bevin to Isaacs, 12 November 1945.

²⁴MRC/MSS.15B/M/3/D/1/31, Frank Maitland deposit, National Docks Strike Committee, *To You, the Public, We Present Our Case*, November 1945.

that no striker be victimised, the London committee requested a 25s daily minimum, a forty hour week, adequate pensions and improved medical services.²⁵ The espousal of similar programmes by the various other strike committees may have struck the TGWU leadership as conspiratorial, but whether communist-inspired or not the Charter was official Union policy. It certainly appeared to many TGWU dock members that the unofficial committees were more active champions of the Charter than the Union leadership. Any apprehension that the Union was dragging its feet over the policy would certainly not have been misplaced, given Donovan's noted lack of enthusiasm for negotiating on the basis of the 25 shilling daily minimum.²⁶

Indeed, the strike indicated that the relationship between the Union and its dock members was not at all healthy, and revealed that for many workers within the labour movement the euphoria of the July election was short-lived. This was acknowledged by Union officials as well as independent observers. Reporting from Liverpool during the first week of the strike, the *Manchester Guardian's* labour correspondent found that very few workers were interested in the arrival of Jack Donovan in the port, as the TGWU attempted to resolve the initial piece-rate and impounded books disputes. In fact, the majority appeared actively hostile to their national officer's presence:

This antagonism towards their union, it must be stressed, is no sudden development. It is a growing development that has been brought to a head by the strike and conversations with the men at any of the control points at which they assemble to discuss matters provide evidence of a very real solidarity on this point. They state that time after time they have been disappointed and 'let down' by the union's handling of complaints. Indeed a list of union 'failures' has been compiled. One striker said, 'Because their hands are tied is always the explanation for their own inaction. They have become our masters instead of our servants.'²⁷

The London strike committee also emphasised the men's frustration with the inability or unwillingness of the TGWU to force the pace of the negotiations. One of its pamphlets mocked the official leadership's insistence that due attention to constitutional procedures would bear fruit: 'We have pleaded and begged for the Union to fight for better conditions. The Unions have pledged us that they are going forward, that the official machinery has been set in

²⁵PRO: BK 1/105, London Central Strike Committee, *Mandate*, undated, but clearly printed and distributed in October 1945.

²⁶DNTGC, 30 October 1945.

²⁷*Manchester Guardian*, 5 October 1945.

motion. It has been set in motion, round and round, getting nowhere, nothing happening.'²⁸

Contemporary press reports of unofficial meetings in support of the strike provide further suggestions of hostility towards the Union leadership. At a Merseyside rally attended by an estimated 10,000 dockers on 14 October, the secretary of the Liverpool committee, Philip Callanan, provided details of the salaries enjoyed by the Union's top officials. As General Secretary Bevin had received £1,365, Deakin was receiving £1,114 and Jack Donovan £686. Callanan claimed that these officials were out of touch with the members who paid their salaries.²⁹ In Manchester at the meeting which called for strike action no Union representative had been present, 'and the feeling among the men generally seemed to be that the union could be ignored'.³⁰

With the majority of its members in open revolt, TGWU leaders met to discuss their response to the strike on 12 October. With Acting General Secretary Arthur Deakin in attendance, the National Docks Trade Group Committee sat in special session and considered developments since the last week of September. The meeting began with Deakin describing a vote of no confidence in Jack Donovan, passed by the Manchester strikers, as 'a dastardly attempt to discredit a man who had given of his best'. His own confidence in the National Secretary was absolute. The Acting General-Secretary's opening statement was immediately qualified by Cooper, the Manchester Area representative. To Cooper's knowledge a vote of no confidence had not actually been passed. However, 'it did appear in the minds of the members that the Union did not mean to do anything except take their money'. This sentiment, expressed by a senior Union official, anticipated Callanan's remarks at the unofficial gathering in Liverpool, by two days.³¹

More direct criticisms of Donovan's handling of the situation were made by the Scottish area representatives present. An unofficial meeting had taken place at Leith, not with a view to taking strike action, but simply in order for the men to get hold of 'the facts'. 'Nobody could give them the facts except for the circular which Bro. Donovan had sent out.' Two representatives were duly

²⁸PRO: BK 1/105, London Central Strike Committee, *Why Strike?* Also undated, but again clearly printed and distributed in October 1945.

²⁹*The Times*, 15 October. Callanan, described by the *Daily Herald* on 11 October as Merseyside strike secretary, was usually referred to as 'Callaghan' by *The Times* correspondent.

³⁰*Manchester Guardian*, 9 October 1945.

³¹DNTGC, 12 October 1945.

sent from Leith to Liverpool, with a view to gathering more information about the origins of the dispute. 'When Bro. Donovan had said the Union were behind the 61 men, it was the first intimation they had and it was the with-holding of the facts that was creating confusion.' Deakin expressed his gratitude for this statement and noted that 'his thoughts were running with what had been said'. However, rather than giving primary attention to the thoughts of his Scottish brothers, Deakin appears to have been swayed by the explanation for the strike which the Liverpool area representatives offered to the Committee. The essence of their position was that the marginal Trotskyist organisation, the Revolutionary Communist Party, had been 'a big factor in the trouble'.³²

At a Transport House press conference held later that day by Deakin and Donovan, the Union Secretariat issued a statement that characterised the actions of 'self-chosen leaders' as damaging to the workforce in that it delayed any settlement of the outstanding claim. The statement concluded by making much of the information supplied by the Liverpool officials:

There is definite evidence that the present stoppage has been seized upon by people connected with certain political organisations who had ready-prepared machinery at their disposal for encouraging and maintaining strike action. We think our members should know this and discard these people and make up their minds to use the constitutional machinery already at their disposal.³³

In a personal statement Deakin confirmed that the organisation referred to was the RCP, which he accused of 'fomenting and spreading the strikes'. He also implied that the Trotskyists had booked halls and obtained loud-speakers, vans and cars before the strike began. Donovan also stressed the role of political subversion, although he added that some shipowners and employers in Liverpool and Hull had been keen 'to foment the difficulty'.³⁴

This attempt to link the establishment of the Liverpool strike committee with the Revolutionary Communist Party was somewhat disingenuous. A historian of the far left in Britain, John Callaghan, has detailed the financial, organisational and numerical weaknesses of the RCP in 1944-5. With only 500 or so national members it was hardly well placed to organise and sustain a strike of 10,000 Merseyside dockers, especially when a large number of its members and the bulk of its limited financial resources were concentrated in

³²Ibid.

³³Full text of statement in Ibid.

³⁴*The Times*, 13 October 1945.

London.³⁵ The only apparent connection between the RCP and the strike was its offer of a £40 grant-in-aid to the Liverpool strikers, which the Merseyside committee had refused, as it had a similar offer from Communist Party of Great Britain activists in Liverpool. Frank Campbell, who chaired the Merseyside committee, plausibly claimed that he knew nothing else about the RCP. The Trotskyists were more forthcoming, insisting that the TGWU statement was a 'miserable falsification'. They added that if Deakin and Donovan were to oppose the employers with the same energy with which they were undermining the strike, the stoppage 'would be over tomorrow morning and the dockers would have their 25s a day and a 40-hour week'.³⁶

The *Manchester Guardian* correspondent lamented the fact that Deakin had introduced the 'old and once fashionable distraction in the Communist "bogy"'.³⁷ The attention paid to the Trotskyists of the Revolutionary Communist Party in this instance cannot pass without special emphasis. During the 1948 and 1949 dock strikes Deakin would repeat the charge that unrest in the docks was politically motivated. However, on these occasions he was to place blame not on the Trotskyists, but on their sworn ideological enemies, the Stalinists of the British Communist Party. As at all times, in October 1945 the Stalinists and the Trotskyists in Britain presented entirely different political analyses. The RCP was hostile to the Labour Government, and duly welcomed the dock strike as a healthy expression of conscious working-class struggle. The British Communist Party's attitude to the Labour Government - and the wider labour movement - was completely different. After the momentous election result of 26 July, the Party's Executive Committee had pledged 'wholehearted support to the Labour Government in bringing the war against Japan to early victory, and carrying out the great social changes and the policy of international co-operation for which the people voted with such decision and confidence'.³⁸ This support was largely maintained in the remaining months of 1945. It is telling, for instance, that unlike a number of Labour back-benchers, both Communist MPs supported the Government over

³⁵John Callaghan, *British Trotskyism. Theory and Practice*, pp.27-39. The Revolutionary Communist Party of the 1940s, which was affiliated to Trotsky's Fourth International, should not be confused with the anti-Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party of the 1990s, purveyor of the hopelessly sectarian journal, *Living Marxism*.

³⁶Respective responses from Campbell and the RCP leadership reported by *Manchester Guardian*, 14 October 1945.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 14 October 1945.

³⁸Communist Party, *World News and Views*, 4 August 1945.

the US loan in December 1945, with Willie Gallacher arguing that it would allow the beginnings of socialist reconstruction in Britain.³⁹ This general position required the British Communists to take a suitably cautious line on the dock strike. Whilst sympathising with the material grievances of the men on strike - the *Daily Worker* urged, 'These men have a case and it must be heard'⁴⁰ - the CP broadly opposed the dockers' use of an unofficial strike to attain their ends. The Stalinists were also concerned that the dock strike would delay the emergence of a socialist Britain by damaging the unity of the movement and consequently the effectiveness of the Labour Government. As early as 8 October the Merseyside area committee of the Party 'pointed out that the dockers have achieved public recognition but that to continue attacking the union would mean playing into the employers' hands and weakening their own unity'. The Party's General Secretary, Harry Pollitt, warned that the dock strike had been provoked by employers with the purpose of discrediting the movement and the Government.⁴¹ As the dispute dragged on, communists continued to emphasise that the strike had been useful in giving publicity to the dockers' plight, but that its prolongation was unacceptable. On 26 October the *Daily Worker* stated, 'all that can be achieved by an unofficial strike of this character has been achieved. To continue beyond this point means purposeless exhaustion and hardship.'⁴²

With the Communist Party an increasingly unambiguous opponent of the strike, the TGWU leadership was duly denied an established 'bogy' on which to pin blame for the stoppage. This may explain the peculiar assertions about the disruptive role of Trotskyism, which recalled Ernest Bevin's war-time rumblings about the involvement in strikes of 'Trotskyites and other anti-war people', at a time when the Communist Party's insistence on tight industrial discipline had been absolute.⁴³ During the 1948 and 1949 strikes a very different situation would exist, for the CP's attitude towards the Labour Government had by then been transformed by the Cominform's 'Two Camps' thesis of 1947, and allegations about communist involvement were much more freely bandied about, by Government Ministers and newspaper editors as well as TGWU leaders.

³⁹Morgan, op.cit., p.150.

⁴⁰*Daily Worker*, 12 October 1945.

⁴¹Ibid., 9 and 15 October 1945.

⁴²Ibid., 26 October 1945.

⁴³Above, p.12.

Neither the TGWU press conference and statement of 12 October nor the Communist Party's numerous interventions weakened the strike. The unofficial committees maintained, as has been noted, their attack on the leadership of the Union, and the majority of the Union's dock members remained on strike. The conjunction of this mass defiance and the fury of the invective of Campbell, Callanan and other unofficial leaders, fuelled speculation that a rival trade union organisation might emerge. Clearly there was collaboration between the unofficial leaderships established in the various ports. On 22 October the Bristol port authorities informed the National Dock Labour Corporation that three days previously two unofficial leaders from London, Constable and Campbell, had 'slipped' into the docks, 'where presumably they indulged in their propaganda'.⁴⁴ Three days earlier Liverpool men had spoken at an unofficial meeting in London, and London men had been given a hearing at a similar gathering in Liverpool.

Given the sectional nature of the industry's history, the London meeting which the Liverpool men addressed on 16 October indicated a further significant feature of the strike. One of the local speakers was Thomas Powell, a member of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union from the Royals Section, and chairman of the London strike committee. The composition of this committee, which cut across sectional borders, was a reminder that the TGWU itself had failed to organise the entire port on an industrial basis, and Powell claimed that with 40,000 workers on strike in defiance of the TGWU, a new union could be formed at a moment's notice. In Liverpool on the same day, when an official Union meeting was ignored by all those on strike, Frank Campbell agreed that such a move was possible: 'We certainly could form another union. We are strong enough. But we don't intend to do so.'⁴⁵

The reasoning behind this position was indicated on the following day, with the London strike committee restating that the strike was in pursuit of official Union policy. The immediate goals of the strike were those of the TGWU, namely a 25s day and a 40 hour week. There was no question of abandoning the Union, rather the object was to 'clean up the union from

⁴⁴PRO: BK1/105, communication from Bristol port authorities to National Dock Labour Corporation, 22 October 1945. Harry Constable (born 1914 or 1915), TGWU member in the Royals sector. Constable's subsequent activities in the unofficial movement are discussed at various points in later chapters.

⁴⁵*Manchester Guardian*, 17 October 1945.

within', in order that it would campaign more vigorously for the Charter and more accurately reflect the alleged militancy of the dock members.⁴⁶

If there was little likelihood that an official rival would be established, there still remained for Union leaders the potential long-term problem of a nationally-co-ordinated unofficial movement. In reporting the exchange of unofficial speakers between the two great ports, the *Manchester Guardian's* labour correspondent had warned that such a phenomenon would be 'an even more serious challenge to the official unions than the strikes themselves'.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Frank Campbell denied the possibility of such a development. On 22 October he said, 'We don't intend to tie ourselves up with London or with any other port in the country.'⁴⁸

This remark and also the pattern of subsequent developments suggested, in fact, the prospect that divisions were present within the unofficial leadership. The TGWU Docks Group Committee noted that on the last day of October, 'a body calling itself the National Docks Strike Committee', gathered in Liverpool. The meeting was attended by men from Dundee, Leith, Hull, Grimsby, Manchester, Preston, Garston and Liverpool. Neither Campbell or Callanan was present; nor was Powell, although the TGWU member from London who had 'slipped' into the Bristol docks twelve days previously, Harry Constable, was. Frank Campbell's absence suggests that his remarks of 22 October were made in perfectly good faith.

In any event, it would appear that the meeting was called with the purpose of co-ordinating the termination, rather than the extension, of the strike. Significantly, when Campbell was talking down the possibility of the unofficial movements' assuming a national cohesive basis, secret moves involving Union officials and the strikers' unofficial representatives were already afoot to bring the dispute to a closure.

The slow move towards a resolution perhaps began on 15 October, when a group of London port employers had resolved that their National Association should not negotiate with the unions on the September claim until the men had resumed work. The employers felt that to do so would be disastrous, because 'if the men's demands were met on the 18th [at the scheduled National Joint Council meeting] full credit for the award would be claimed by the unofficial strike leaders to the discredit of the Unions. By refusing to negotiate during

⁴⁶*The Times*, 18 October 1945.

⁴⁷*Manchester Guardian*, 17 October 1945.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 23 October 1945.

the strike the Employers would be supporting the Unions' efforts to get the men back to work. Until the Unions had regained control of their members they were not in a position to implement any agreement.⁴⁹

At the joint talks on 18 October the employers duly refused to resume negotiations on pay and conditions. The talks carried an important coda, however, namely that negotiations would re-open within 24 hours of a general resumption of work.⁵⁰ This was increasingly significant in the days that followed. The strike's national scale had apparently stemmed from the workforce's frustration with the lack of urgency in negotiations, but the National Joint Council's straightforward statement implied that the only impediment to the talks was now the strike itself.

With some of the unofficial leaders possibly realising that the initiative was passing from their hands, but with Union officials perhaps also aware that an unconditional termination of the strike was too great a humiliation for the unofficial movements to contemplate, a most extraordinary meeting was held in Liverpool over the weekend of 20-21 October. Hosted by the Mayor of Bootle, the secret gathering was an obvious departure from the TGWU's usual position of refusing to recognise 'self-chosen' leaders. The Union's Docks National Trade Group Committee minutes record that Union officials and four (unspecified) unofficial representatives of the Liverpool men discussed 'ways and means of terminating the strike'. Attention was drawn to the National Docks Delegate Conference that had been arranged for 23 October, and the strike leaders 'were informed that it was possible that the National Committee [ie the official Docks Group Committee] would issue a direction to the members to resume and allow negotiations to proceed, and if this were endorsed by the Delegate Conference they [ie the strike leaders] would be able to say that they could not hold up negotiations any longer.' The Docks Group Committee also resolved that Deakin himself would meet two of the Liverpool men at the Delegate Conference, 'as members of the union'. Constitutional propriety would be preserved with the official Committee's assertion that a resumption of work had to be ordered by the Union rather than unofficial movement.⁵¹

⁴⁹LML/LWA 73, Executive Council of London Association of Public Wharfingers Limited, Special Meeting, 15 October 1945.

⁵⁰LML/LWA 57, National Association of Port Employers' Executive Committee Minutes, 25 October 1945.

⁵¹DNTGC, 22 October 1945. The date of this meeting is unspecified: presumably it took place over the weekend of 21-22 October.

The National Docks Delegate Conference held in London on 23 October indeed passed the type of resolution which union officials had hinted at during the secret meeting in Liverpool:

this Delegate Conference ... recognises the deep sense of grievance and the feeling existing in the minds of the men at this time and calls for an immediate resumption of work as an organised body, so ending the existing deadlock. We urge that work be resumed at once in accordance with the requirement contained in Clause 18 of the Constitution of the National Joint Council in order to enable the negotiating machinery to function without delay. We further pledge that there will be no victimisation.⁵²

This initiative clearly indicated a spirit of conciliation which the TGWU leadership had lacked earlier in the dispute, and recognised the strikers' obvious reluctance to be bullied into a return. It also provided the unofficial movement with the opportunity to end the strike with its dignity intact. That such an opportunity might be grasped was not immediately apparent, with the London strike committee indicating that it was 'surprised and disgusted' by the Conference decision.⁵³ But in the wake of the previous week's confidential rendez-vous, the official Union Conference elicited a more favourable response from the Mersey leadership, with Philip Callanan speaking of the men's 'duty to try to find a sensible way out of this deadlock. We do not wish to create wholesale chaos throughout the country.'⁵⁴

Liverpool was seen by the Union as the key area, with dockers in other ports pledged to stay out until the Mersey men had agreed to resume work. The hope that Liverpool would return was dashed in the short-term, when an unofficial meeting on 26 October decided to stay out. However, the Union's information was that this decision was contrary to the general mood of the workers, which favoured resumption. This intelligence would appear to have been correct. After the strike committee's meeting on 26 October, the Union made arrangements for postal ballots to be taken of members at Liverpool, Manchester and the two Humber ports. These ballots, counted on 2 November,

⁵²MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/23, TGWU Finance and General Purposes Committee, 25-26 October, report of National Docks Delegate Conference, 23 October 1945.

⁵³*Daily Worker*, 24 October 1945.

⁵⁴*Daily Herald*, 25 October 1945.

revealed substantial majorities in favour of a return: at Liverpool 7,177 were for immediate resumption with 2,846 against.⁵⁵

Anticipating the result of the ballot perhaps, the Liverpool strike committee called a mass meeting for the morning of Friday 2 November, at which the strikers resolved to return to work on the following Monday, 5 November. Meetings at various ports around the country, apparently co-ordinated by the unofficial 'national' committee established on 31 October, reached identical decisions on 2 November. After forty-one days the 'national' unofficial committee declared the strike over, although reserving for itself a right to resume strike action if the National Joint Council failed to arrive at a satisfactory settlement within thirty days of the talks restarting on 5 November.⁵⁶

Work did indeed fully restart on 5 November, and although the question of pay and conditions was not finally resolved until the middle of December, the threat made by the national committee to revert to strike action was not carried out. The aims of the Charter were not secured by the December settlement, but the employers were forced into significant concessions. The daily minimum rate was increased for time and piece workers to 19s, and the workforce awarded an annual paid holiday of one week. In addition, men not required to work on statutory or proclaimed holidays would be paid the standard time rate for the holiday. Those required to work would receive the standard daily time rate plus payment for the time actually worked at the standard time or piece rate.⁵⁷

SEPARATE SPHERES OR DESPERATE FOR DOLLARS? THE STRIKE AND THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT

Throughout the dispute, the Labour Government sternly insisted that the strike was entirely unjustified. Ministers asked the men on strike to return to work as soon as possible, in order that negotiations on their claim could proceed, and that the process of post-war economic recovery be also allowed to continue. This behaviour might be interpreted as less vigorous than the response made by the Government's trade union partners. Certainly Whitehall

⁵⁵MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/23, TGWU General Executive Council, 9 November 1945.

⁵⁶*Manchester Guardian and Daily Worker*, 3 November 1945.

⁵⁷MRC/MSS.126 T&G/4/1/25, TGWU General Executive Council Report, 1945-46, Appendix IV, Docks Group Report, terms of December 1945 Agreement.

issued no allegations about political subversion to compare with the Transport Workers' attack on the Liverpool strike committee on 12 October. The relatively relaxed public pronouncements of the Government on the strike would appear to be consistent with Lewis Minkin's observations concerning the 'separate spheres' of activity within the labour movement, with politicians ceding trade unionists the 'freedom' over the regulation of industrial disputes.⁵⁸

This apparent neutrality was, however, qualified by the use of state powers which the Government made to diminish the effectiveness of the strike action. Under the 1939 Emergency Powers (Defence) Act which was still in force, a total of 21,000 troops were deployed, in the words of a Ministry of War Transport press statement, 'to do the work the dockers should be doing'.⁵⁹

The dual nature of the Government's response - what might be termed strikebreaking without vilification of the strikers - is recorded in the banal Cabinet minutes of 9 October, the first formal ministerial discussion of the dispute. The Minister of Labour, George Isaacs, informed his colleagues that 'a serious situation' was developing as a result of the strike. In Liverpool six ships with perishable cargoes were waiting to be unloaded. Two of these carried bacon, and if this was lost then an immediate cut in the bacon ration would be necessary. The Minister sought approval for his department's favoured course of action, which was to discharge all six of the food-carrying vessels with military labour. This approval was given.⁶⁰

This was a decision of immense historical significance. Yet, as Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy have indicated, the sense of collective ministerial insouciance is overwhelming:

There it was. Less than three months after taking office for the first time with an overall majority, a Labour Government contemplated the use of troops to break a strike, apparently without any dissent from the ministers around the Cabinet table.⁶¹

Of course, the Government did not simply 'contemplate' the deployment of service labour, and troops had been used to unload ships in London during the 'go slow' in the first week of August, but the significance of the Jeffery and Hennessy observation stands. Without reference to the ideological implications

⁵⁸Above, pp.4-8.

⁵⁹Ministry of War Transport statement, *Daily Herald*, 31 October 1945.

⁶⁰PRO: CAB 128/CM(45)39, 9 October 1945.

⁶¹Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy, *States of Emergency*, p.155.

of their action, the Government was to send troops into the docks in the same casual manner during five further disputes in the ensuing six years.

The Government was clear on one thing, however, namely that the deployment of troops was not entirely unconnected with the preservation of the labour alliance 'rules' identified by Minkin. Jeffery and Hennessy note that these steps were taken with the blessing, if not at the actual instigation, of Ernest Bevin. According to them, George Isaacs worked under the 'huge shadow' of the predecessor who had fixed his appointment. They also claim - presumably on the basis of Bevin's character and Isaacs's deference rather than secret evidence left to posterity by the security services - that 'in the early days of the 1945 Parliament Bevin was constantly on the telephone from the Foreign Office to St.James's Square [ie the Ministry of Labour] offering Isaacs advice he was in no position to refuse. Bevin was not a man given to self-doubt at the best of times. When dealing with dock disputes he had no scepticism about the accuracy of his insights.'⁶²

With Bevin closely tracking, if not actually determining the Minister of Labour's strategy, the Government inevitably found itself using troops to defend the TGWU and the industry against the unofficial strikers. On 10 October George Isaacs made his first House of Commons statement on the strike, announcing the introduction of service labour. The Minister observed that whatever grievances the men had, strike action was unjustified, for the 'constitutional machinery of the industry' had a long record of success, and it was in the dockers' interests 'that its authority be maintained'. Adopting the moral tone that would become an integral feature of his handling of industrial unrest in the docks, Isaacs added that the strikers' responsibility to themselves, their families and the country, was to return to work. When David Logan, a Labour MP from Liverpool, asked Isaacs to meet some of his constituents who were on strike, the Minister also established that it was not the Government's intention to concern itself with the resolution of the dispute. Re-emphasising the importance of observing established procedure, he replied: 'No, Sir, the men should trust the machinery of the organisation. They would, I am sure, resent a Government official stepping in between them and the Union. They should trust the Union. I am sure the Union will see them through.'⁶³

Cabinet considered the dock strike for a second time on Monday 15 October. In the intervening period Parkin, a senior officer at the National Dock Labour

⁶²Ibid., p.156.

⁶³*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.414, 229-30, 10 October 1945.

Corporation, had restated the case for the low-key approach implicit in the previous Cabinet discussion. In a letter to his colleague Norris, Parkin summarised the Corporation's belief that a restoration of the workers' faith in due constitutional processes would require prudence on the part of Union leaders as well as Ministers. Parkin suggested that if 'the Union is to re-establish itself, it must debunk these unofficial leaders and we must be careful not to take any action which would, in effect, turn them into martyrs'.⁶⁴ With Deakin and Donovan spectacularly failing to live up to such a task, with the 'Trotskyist plot' press conference hosted within hours of this plea for caution, Ministers had to be especially careful that the course of events did not further undermine the Union's authority. On 15 October Cabinet therefore concurred with Isaacs's request that no enquiry be made into the origins and nature of the strike, lest this disrupt the Docks' National Joint Council negotiations which were set to resume three days later.⁶⁵ In the wake of this joint industrial meeting the Union was able to cast the unofficial leadership as the body responsible for holding up the talks, and the Government used this to reject any notion that it might more actively intervene.

Requests for positive action from the Government continued to be made by MPs who sympathised with the material grievances of the dock workers. On 15 October Willie Gallacher spoke of the 'real grievances' of the dockers, and asked Isaacs whether he would 'call a conference of employers, trade union officials, and representatives of the dock areas, with a view to accelerating negotiations and getting the strike ended?' Unsurprisingly, in the wake of that morning's Cabinet discussion, Isaacs cautiously intoned that it would be 'most unwise to let anything accrue to those who take unofficial action in this matter'.⁶⁶ A fortnight later the veteran of Red Clydeside, David Kirkwood, made another vain attempt to force a change in the Government's position:

The workers are out on strike all over the place, they are striking all over the country simultaneously. There is something seriously wrong, and I want to appeal to the Minister of Labour ... if he himself goes and speaks to the strikers in London the strike will be finished. (Interruption) Why should not Ministers come off their pedestals when it is a question of dealing with the working class? This has been the lot of workers right down the ages. Why cannot he do this?⁶⁷

⁶⁴PRO: BK 1/105, Parkin to Norris, 12 October 1945.

⁶⁵PRO: CAB 128/CM(45)41, 15 October 1945.

⁶⁶*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.414, 698, 15 October 1945.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, Vol.415, 246-7, 30 October 1945.

The separate interventions of such disparate figures as Logan, Gallacher and Kirkwood, indicated that on the right and left of the labour movement, there was considerable unease over the Government's handling of the dispute. The Independent Labour Party suggested that dockers urgently needed pay increases to keep pace with increased living costs, and stated, 'The Dockers MUST Win'. Unlike the Communist Party, which had also sympathised with if not actually supported the strikers, the ILP openly criticised the Government: 'The Government has handled the situation badly and have given the impression of backing the employers against the workers. In addition it has backed this attitude by introducing military force at the docks.'⁶⁸

On the right-wing of the Labour party, the MP for Liverpool Exchange, Bessie Braddock, threw her formidable weight - political as well as physical - into the fray. On 31 October, prior to the convention of the 'national' strike committee in Liverpool, Braddock had held talks with the local unofficial leaders. This meeting was also attended by Logan and three other local Labour MPs, Joseph Gibbins, James Haworth and James Keenan, who was a former TGWU official.⁶⁹ Braddock's political orthodoxy - as a long-serving member of the party's NEC she was a renowned hammer of the left⁷⁰ - suggests that her decision to meet the strike leaders was a result of widespread support for the men's position in Liverpool. Discussing this meeting in the House of Commons, Braddock said that 'I have never, in all my industrial and political career, found such perfect organisation as the dock strikers have at this moment.' Urging the Government to pay close attention to ensuing negotiations, Braddock added her certainty 'that men who have put in so much during the war, who have worked under such tremendous difficulties in the ports during the blitzes, would not remain on unofficial strike for five weeks unless there was something fundamentally wrong with their conditions of labour and the position as it exists in the ports today.'⁷¹

The notion that it was the duty of a Labour Government to intervene in an industrial dispute on the side of the workers evidently aroused considerable

⁶⁸MRC/MSS.15B/M/3/D/1/30, ILP handbill, 'The Dockers MUST Win', October 1945.

⁶⁹*The Times*, 1 November 1945.

⁷⁰Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, p.245. Braddock was on the NEC 1947-8, 1958-69.

⁷¹*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.415, 872-4, 2 November 1945. The memoirs of Jack and Bessie Braddock, *The Braddocks* (1963), shed no light on her role in the 1945 dispute.

anxiety amongst Ministers and Union leaders. On 31 October the *Daily Herald* patiently explained that the Government's approach, with intervention restricted to the use of military labour in the ports, was in the interests of the working class. A leader column entitled 'Your Government', ran:

An argument presented to dockers by some strike leaders is this:

'The Labour Government is your Government. You are entitled to use it as your servant, and to insist that it shall remedy your grievances on demand. If the Government does not act forthwith, then the Government is betraying you.'

We reply: Humbug! For while the Labour Government is undoubtedly the servant of the dockers, it is also the servant of the whole nation, including all the millions of workers who are organised in trade unions. This Government won the votes of the people with a programme which included a solemn pledge to uphold and advance the Trade Union Movement.

The Government will be faithful to trade unionists: but trade unionists must be faithful to their unions.

Dockers who remain on strike in defiance of their democratically elected leaders, must surely realise that they are weakening the authority of the unions, damaging the repute and complicating the task of the Labour Government, and undermining Democracy. If the constitutional machinery is deemed to be inadequate it must be reformed from within.

What is happening now at the docks is that constitutional methods are being repudiated and that an advantage is being conferred upon the enemies of working-class organisation.⁷²

With no formal ministerial initiative to resolve the problems underwriting the strike, the build-up of troops begun on 10 October continued. By 16 October there were 16,000 troops at work in the docks, including the trained stevedores of the Royal Engineers.⁷³ The strikers held little animosity towards these men. Said Philip Callanan, 'The Army are our friends, our brothers and our sons. Liverpool dockers have provided for the Army, the Navy and Merchant Navy throughout the war. We appreciate that, whatever they do, they have to do their job as an order.'⁷⁴ According to Jack Dash, who became a docker in London in June 1945,⁷⁵ the London men regarded the largely conscripted

⁷²*Daily Herald*, 31 October 1945.

⁷³Jeffery and Hennessy, op.cit., p.156; Peak, op.cit., p.88.

⁷⁴*Daily Herald*, 11 October 1945.

⁷⁵Jack Dash (1907-89), was variously a shop worker, soldier, professional boxer, hod carrier and war-time auxiliary fireman, before entering the Royals section of Port of London as a docker in June 1945. He became effective leader of the London unofficial movement in the late 1950s, a position which he held until his retirement in 1970, and which brought him to national prominence. See his memoirs - entitled *Good Morning Brothers!* - and his entry in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography IX* (1993), written by Daniel Ballard and David E. Martin.

force without malice. 'There was no real anger against the troops themselves. It was only one year after most of the dockers had been troops themselves. Our only anger was against the Labour government; this was the last thing we expected.'⁷⁶

Whatever the dock workers expected of the Government, Ministers remained insistent that they expected the men on strike to realise their responsibilities and resume work. On 19 October Isaacs protested in the House of Commons that: 'The action of the strikers cannot be defended and neither the employers nor the trade unions can have confidence in negotiating a new agreement while the obligations of the existing agreement are being repudiated in this way.'⁷⁷

On 26 October the Government did broaden its involvement in the dispute, although not in the manner that Dash and his comrades would have wished. With over 46,000 dockers on strike and 225 ships immobilised, the Government extended the deployment of service labour in the docks. Given the differences which emerged in 1947 between the Transport and Labour Ministries over the introduction of the Dock Labour Scheme, it is significant that this development took place at the request of the Transport Minister, Alfred Barnes. Cabinet responded positively to his request that military labour now encompass vessels loading export cargoes. Troops would also clear the ships which supplied imports bought with sterling. This would save the precious dollars which were being rapidly consumed by imports.⁷⁸ Barnes's successful request indicated the manner in which the government's priorities were ordered. With Keynes in Washington negotiating a loan from the US Government, the primary consideration was not simply that of maintaining people with a regular, if meagre, supply of bacon, eggs, oranges and cheese. The perilous economic position, with the need for dollars already desperate, persuaded ministers that the strike could not be allowed to delay the turn-round of shipping any longer.

Jeffery and Hennessy record that the 'hard line' adopted by the Government was a success. A forty-one day strike was terminated without a firm pay offer 'on the table'.⁷⁹ This conclusion ignores both the manner in which the dispute had been terminated and the important material gains which the dockers subsequently won. Evidently the Government had not

⁷⁶Jack Dash, speaking in 1982, quoted in Peak, *op.cit.*, p.89.

⁷⁷*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.414, 1553, 19 October 1945.

⁷⁸PRO: CAB 128/CM(45)46, 26 October 1945.

⁷⁹Jeffery and Hennessy, *op.cit.*, p.160.

intervened to resolve the dispute, as the unofficial movement had requested, and the commitment to the use of troops obviously served as a warning to the men that the strike would not be allowed to interfere with supplies of food and raw materials. There was, however, the additional and considerable factor of the secret Liverpool meeting which had prepared the ground for the return to work. What is more, within six weeks of the strike's termination, the dockers received a formal advance in their guaranteed minimum daily rate for the first time since 1922. In the face of the employers' sworn insistence that there would be no scope for any advance upon the 16s daily minimum, it might be suggested that the strike had illustrated the men's determination to force such a raise upon the industry. Certainly Jack Dash recalled that his comrades in the Royal Docks of London regarded the strike and the December settlement as events to celebrate rather than mourn. In so doing he also indicated the attitude of the unofficial leadership towards the TGWU and to subsequent developments: 'We returned to work jubilant and victorious, determined to maintain the inter-port unity that had been built up through the National Portworkers' Unofficial Committee, not to usurp the power of our accredited trade unions, but to make sure that the demands of the rank and file were acted on.'⁸⁰

There is also the question of the extent to which the Government had adopted a 'hard line'. Clearly troops were used on a massive scale and this military labour, while deployed ostensibly in the 'national interest' of maintaining the economic life of the wider community, actively undermined the unofficial strike's effectiveness. In this sense the Government did break the strike. In so doing, however, the Government's actions were remarkably free from the tactical smears which would characterise its response to the significantly smaller 1948 and 1949 disputes. In contrast to Deakin's outburst on 12 October, Ministers made no suggestion that political subversion was underpinning the strike.

If the Government's public position on the strike was relatively relaxed, there is evidence also to suggest that in private its attitude to the strikers was more generous than the large-scale deployment of strike-breaking servicemen might suggest. In the immediate aftermath of the strike but with the wage issue still unresolved, Ernest Bevin himself partly conceded the justice of the strikers' demands. Writing to Isaacs, Bevin reminded him that the 1921 Shaw Inquiry had fixed the daily minimum of 16s. Although most dockers

⁸⁰Jack Dash, *op. cit.*, p.59.

were earning much more than this from piece-rates and special war-work rates, 16s remained the basic rate for daily engagement. This was an important obstacle to peace in the docks: 'The output now is nearly double, the number of men has fallen from 180,000 to 60,000, and if ever there was a case where the men were entitled to improvement it seems to me to be in the dock industry.' The Foreign Secretary had made some 'discreet inquiries', which suggested that 'if the men could get £1 a day you would have a settlement, and quite frankly I think it is worth it.'⁸¹

CONCLUSION: AN INTERNAL CRISIS OR BUNGLING AMATEURS?

Ernest Bevin's typical private candour strongly indicated that, whilst utterly rejecting the legitimacy of the unofficial strike, the labour movement's leaders did sympathise with the material position of the men on strike. The *Transport and General Workers' Record* called attention to the fact that 'the dockers have a deep sense of grievance'. However, the Union was more concerned with another aspect of the dispute. Its salient feature had not been the misfortune of their members' circumstances, but the 'certain elements who have made up their minds that they will do everything possible to destroy the constitutional machinery which has been built up over a long period of years, and embarrass the Labour Government by trying to force it to act as a substitute for trade unions'.⁸² The TGWU was evidently harassed by the Liverpool 'national strike committee' meeting on 31 October, which gave the unofficial movement an apparent 'national' footing. Jack Donovan was particularly troubled by this, telling other officers on the Docks Group Committee: 'I submit this is an impossible position for the Union, and so long as these unofficial disruptive elements are allowed to retain their membership of the Union and carry on their activities outside the constitution, it will be absolutely impossible for me ... or the Dock officers ... to function.'⁸³

This theme was pursued, perhaps not without satisfaction, by *The Times's* labour correspondent as the men returned to work and negotiations on the National Joint Council looked set to resume. He made a further observation

⁸¹PRO: FO 800/491, Bevin to Isaacs, 21 November 1945. The size of the workforce in 1945 was nearer 80,000 than 60,000. Presumably the error was typographical.

⁸²'The Facts About the Dock Strike', *Transport and General Workers' Record*, November 1945.

⁸³DNTGC, 30 October 1945.

which Donovan had also made in the privacy of the Docks Group Committee rooms, about the manner in which the Charter had been arrived at:

The demands before the employers are to an important degree the result of the steady activity in the union of those who have led the strike and who intend to retain their hold and to change if they do not overthrow the official leadership which they have for more than a month superseded in the principal ports of the country. There is clearly a crisis in the internal affairs of the dockers' section of the Transport and General Workers' Union.⁸⁴

The emergence of an unofficial leadership in opposition to the official one, continued to dominate public discussion of the strike in the months following its termination. In January the Union claimed, contrary to the unofficial movement's criticisms, that it had been pursuing the men's pay claim with the utmost vigour. The delay in attaining the settlement 'was due solely to the interference of bungling amateurs' who had never previously shown an interest in improving the conditions of other dock workers.⁸⁵ Speaking a few months later at the National Docks Labour Corporation's AGM, as a veteran trade unionist as well as the Corporation's chairman, Lord Ammon said that, 'the feature of the strike which disturbed me most profoundly was the unofficial organisation which, for a brief period, sought to dominate industrial negotiations.'⁸⁶

These descriptions of an eruption in unofficial organisation and activity neglected to add, however, that such organisation and activity had long been features of the dock industry. The huge unofficial strike of October 1945 represented a continuation of the historical tradition which was discussed in Chapter Two. As John Lovell has shown, from its origins in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, dock labour organisation was characterised by occasional outbursts of militant strike action, and a solid basis of unionisation was never properly established.⁸⁷ In other words, Bevin had built the TGWU on foundations that were historically flimsy, and the 1945 strike was an indication that the Transport Workers had yet to harness the workforce's undoubted capacity for organisation and union activity.

In terms of the dilemmas facing Keir Hardie's 'Great Alliance' in the immediate wake of 1945's huge triumph, the strike had been no less

⁸⁴*The Times*, 2 November 1945.

⁸⁵*Transport and General Workers' Record*, January, 1946.

⁸⁶PRO: BK 1/151, NDLC Sixth AGM, 27 June 1946.

⁸⁷John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*.

illuminating. The Government had shown its determination to break the strikes with military labour for two purposes. The first objective was to maintain the position of the TGWU and the joint negotiating machinery, thus enabling the trade unions to continue with their traditional role of determining the wages and conditions of workers. The second objective was to maintain Britain's economic life in the extremely perilous conditions prevailing in 1945. Only through economic recovery could the Government fashion the type of Britain that Labour was pledged to realise: strike-breaking was thus presented as a move to protect rather than penalise the working class.

It is worth re-emphasising that the October 1945 strike lasted for forty-one days, involved more than 40,000 workers, cost the port transport industry more than one million working days, and was the largest single industrial dispute of the 1945-51 period. Yet at the same time the Government's attitude towards the strike was much more relaxed than during the later, and significantly smaller, strikes. This is clearly a paradox, but one which historians of the 1945 Labour Government have curiously failed to recognise.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE 'ZINC OXIDE' STRIKE, JUNE 1948.

THE INDUSTRIAL DISPUTE AS A CHALLENGE TO GOVERNMENT

The second large-scale unofficial dock strike which the 1945 Government encountered was the 'Zinc Oxide' dispute of June 1948. After a gang of eleven London dockers had been disciplined for refusing to handle a cargo of zinc oxide satisfactorily, work in the Port of London was severely disrupted for two weeks. From 14-29 June more than half of the Port's industrial workforce - including stevedores, lightermen, cold storage workers and tally clerks as well as dockers - were on unofficial strike. Approximately 19,000 of London's 27,000 men were involved, and sympathetic action was taken by about 9,000 Mersey dockers on 28 and 29 June. The Ministry of Labour's official figures record that the stoppages on the Mersey and the Thames cost the industry collectively more than 200,000 working days.¹

The strike was the first of its kind since the introduction of the Dock Labour Scheme in 1947. The Transport and General Workers' Union had, in 1947, been at pains to emphasise the new situation which the Scheme would bring. Writing in the Union journal, Docks Group Secretary Jack Donovan had encouraged dock workers to observe closely the Scheme's legal basis, and offered his members this warning: 'We desire to make it clear to our members that the decasualisation scheme will be based on an Act of Parliament, and a strike on this issue would not be against the employers but against the Government.'²

In the autumn of 1947 the Union also highlighted the economic implications - for the labour movement, the Government and the nation - of strike action. In the wake of the convertibility crisis which had simultaneously highlighted and deepened the Labour Government's economic problems, the TGWU drew attention to the severity of the economic position, and members were informed that they could either work, or starve, through the present difficulties. The following month Docks Group members were urged to do 'EVERYTHING' that would alleviate

¹PRO: LAB 34/63, Industrial Disputes (All Industries), 1948.

²*Transport and General Workers' Record*, February 1947.

delays in the turn-round of shipping, 'in order that we make our contribution to help the country out of its present difficulties'.³

These changed institutional, legal and economic implications of unofficial industrial action ensured that the TGWU leadership - and its labour movement colleagues in Government - would respond with the utmost vigour to the stoppage in June 1948. In particular, the manner of the Ministerial response differed greatly from October 1945, when the Government had been much less critical of the strikers than had the TGWU leadership. Paradoxically, a sterner line was taken on this occasion - by Ministers and Union officials alike - than during the earlier and much larger dispute. It would appear from the Ministerial response during the June 1948 dispute that the Government broadly shared the assumption held by Jack Donovan, that a strike against the Dock Labour Scheme was also a strike against the Government.

For Ministers there was an important added consideration, however, namely their determination to uphold the Government's authority as the guarantor of essential supplies and services. Since July 1945, along with senior Whitehall civil servants, Labour Ministers had been considering how the Government could maintain essential supplies and services which were disrupted as the result of unofficial strike action. On the basis of a proposal made by the Permanent Under Secretary at the Home Office, Sir Alexander Maxwell, in June 1945, the Government had revived the Supply and Transport Organisation (STO). This was the Government committee, comprising Ministers, civil servants and service chiefs, which had been established in 1925. Responsible for directing military and voluntary civilian labour during the 1926 General Strike, the STO had been allowed to lapse under the 1939 Emergency regulations.⁴ The organisation's place in labour movement demonology was in fact noted in January 1946, when Ministers discussed the form of its reconstitution. With the imminent repeal of the 1927 Trade Unions and Trade Disputes Act, which had outlawed general strikes, Nye Bevan and Sir Stafford Cripps both emphasised the potential embarrassment for the Government, if it became known that it

³Ibid., October and November 1947.

⁴Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy, *States of Emergency*, p. 148.

was simultaneously preparing plans to defeat a general strike if one occurred.⁵

In March 1946 Attlee successfully urged his Cabinet colleagues to set such misgivings aside, and 'paper plans' for the establishment of the STO were put in place.⁶ The STO was put into operation for the first time after the war during the unofficial road transport workers strike of January 1947, when a total of 3,500 troops were deployed in London to maintain the capital's meat rations.⁷ The 1947 road transport strike was also significant in that it illustrated the Government's obvious determination to break unofficial strikes which were disrupting food supplies. Moreover, it showed that Ministers were not prepared to tolerate unofficial industrial action, which threatened the bargaining position of trade unions and their official leaders, and therefore also jeopardised the economic life of the nation. The Government agreed that the Road Haulage Association and the TGWU could not hold negotiations whilst men were on unofficial strike, and Cabinet therefore decided that a declaration of a State of Emergency under the 1920 Emergency Powers Act would be in order. By enabling the Government to take over the entire industry, this would force the men back to work, and duly allow negotiations to proceed.⁸ However, before this measure was implemented, the strike was called off, and the men went back to work on 18 January. In provoking this tough Ministerial opposition, the road transport strike set an important precedent for future industrial dislocation, beginning with the London dock strike of June 1948.

ORIGINS: ZINC OXIDE AND COE'S GANG

The 1948 dock strike began with a piece-rate dispute on Friday 28 May in Regent's Canal Dock. At issue was a 100 ton cargo of zinc oxide which a gang of eleven daily workers, led by J.R. Coe, were loading on to a ship, the s.s. *Thiems*, from barges at a rate of 3s4d per ton.⁹ This rate had been fixed

⁵PRO: PREM 8/673, Supply and Transport Organisation meeting, 29 January 1946.

⁶PRO: CAB 128/CM(46)22, 8 March 1946.

⁷PRO: CAB 130/16, Supply and Transport Organisation, 10 January 1947.

⁸PRO: CAB 128/CM(47)7, 16 January 1947.

⁹PRO: LAB 10/783, the eleven men were J.R. Coe, G. Ashmore, J. Bloomberg, A. Castle, C. Clancy, J. Hogan, W.J. Holland, J. Langley, J. Neill, A.E. Smith and A. Upton.

during a telephone conversation held on the previous afternoon between the employer, the Grand Union (Stevedoring and Wharfage) Co. Ltd., and the local TGWU negotiating official, S.Platt. The fact that Platt agreed the rate from his office, without actually seeing the cargo, later assumed great significance. Platt and the Grand Union were guided by a document drawn up by the Short Sea Traders' Association with the TGWU's agreement, which provided a framework for setting 'dirty traffic' rates. Although zinc oxide was not specifically mentioned in the agreed list, Platt agreed with the Grand Union manager that it be judged as equivalent to more common dirty materials, such as antimony, plumbago and graphite. The piece-rate for these items was 3s4d per ton.¹⁰

Coe's gang began working the zinc oxide on the morning of 28 May, unaware of the previous afternoon's negotiations. Upon learning that Platt had committed them to the rate of 3s4d, the men refused to continue loading the cargo, arguing that it was unusually obnoxious and worthy of 5s per ton. The Grand Union then telephoned Platt, who affirmed that 3s4d was the correct rate, but agreed to visit the ship immediately. Although Platt might at this stage have sided with Coe's men rather than the employer on the piece-rate, it seems probable that he had already boxed himself in, by committing himself to the lower rate on two occasions without having seen the cargo. As a Union negotiator Platt would certainly have been keen to avoid earning a reputation as a man who would not stick by mutual agreements, however informally they had been reached. Upon seeing the cargo himself, in fact he duly confirmed the original rate twice on the afternoon of 28 May: the first time after watching the gang load the cargo for one hour with Aldred, the Secretary of the Short Sea Traders' Association which had compiled the list of 'dirty traffic'; and on the second occasion with Tonge of the Grand Union's parent body, the Public Wharfingers' Association. However, the gang persisted with their claim that the rate was unfair and after Platt had told them that the rate would be 3s4d, they refused to finish loading the zinc oxide, at which point they were offered other work which gave them time to reconsider their position.¹¹ The situation was temporarily resolved over the weekend of 29-30 May, as

¹⁰PRO: BK 2/72, NDLB press statement, 23 June 1948.

¹¹PRO: LAB 10/783, W. Lessiter, Managing Director of Grand Union, to the NDLB, 29 May 1948.

the *Thiems* set sail for Antwerp with the rest of its cargo, minus the zinc oxide.

On 4 June, as another Grand Union vessel, the ss *Margworth*, arrived in the Port of London to receive the zinc oxide, the Joint Sector Committee, the disciplinary section of the London Dock Labour Board on which both employers' associations and unions were represented, met to discuss the case. The Committee found that the men's actions of 28 May were in breach of the Dock Labour Scheme which required men to discharge prescribed duties according to locally-negotiated rules. In London these rules stated that any gang disputing a piece rate had to continue work on a daily scale, pending settlement of the contentious piece rate. On 29 May the gang had indicated that they would only continue loading the zinc oxide at the daily rate if offered an additional 2s6d per man per hour.¹²

The Joint Sector Committee's judgement was passed to the London Board's executive. The Grand Union also asked the London Board to consider the further refusal by Coe's gang, on 4-5 June, to load the new ship, the *Margworth*, with the zinc oxide. It should be noted that under the Scheme's continuity regulations, the original gang were obliged to stick with the task until its completion.¹³

On 7 June the London Board executive appointed an expanded View Committee to watch the work being done. On 8 June the committee, made up of two men from each side of the industry, agreed that the original rate was valid. Although insisting that this was iniquitous, and maintaining the justice of their own position, the gang nevertheless completed loading the cargo at 3s4d per ton on the afternoon of 8 June.¹⁴

On Wednesday 9 June the London Board disciplined the eleven men for having previously abandoned their obligations under the Dock Labour Scheme. They were suspended from the Scheme without pay for seven days, and their rights to attendance money and guaranteed make-up withdrawn for three months.¹⁵ In accordance with the Scheme's disciplinary procedures, the eleven men were entitled to an appeal, but before this could be lodged an unofficial strike committee was established at Wapping in the London Docks section of the port on 10 June. Demanding solidarity

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid: Lessiter to the NDLB, 5 June 1948.

¹⁴*Unofficial Stoppages in the London Docks. Report of a Committee of Inquiry* (Cmd. 8236, 1951), para. 36.

¹⁵PRO: LAB 10/783, Lessiter to the NDLB, 5 June 1948.

against the 'inhumanity' of the penalties, the strike committee called for dockers to take sympathetic strike action, beginning on Monday 14 June.¹⁶

On 11 June a date for an appeal hearing was fixed for Tuesday 15 June. Before this hearing could be held, however, the threatened unofficial strike began on 14 June with 1700 men stopping work.¹⁷ On 15 June the Appeal Tribunal failed to reach agreement, and decided to reconvene two days later. During this delay the stoppage continued to spread, and on the morning of 17 June, when the Appeal Tribunal met again at the London Board, approximately 12,000 dockers had ceased work. Over half of the Port's 230 ships were affected, with work especially disrupted in the Royals Group, where the unofficial committee appears to have been particularly influential.¹⁸

UNOFFICIAL REASONING AND THE INITIAL OFFICIAL RESPONSE

The support which the unofficial strike gave the eleven disciplined men was explained in a pamphlet issued by the 'Port Workers Strike Committee', entitled *The Men's Own Case*. This emphasised the manner in which Platt had compromised both himself and the men by conducting the piece-rate negotiations by telephone rather than in person, and characterised the penalisation of the gang as a 'harsh and vicious punishment'.¹⁹

On 17 June the Appeal Tribunal reduced from three months to two weeks, the period during which the eleven were disentitled to attendance money and guaranteed make-up, but the original seven days' unpaid suspension was upheld. The following morning the strike committee reaffirmed its commitment to the stoppage, prompting the TGWU to issue a press notice which called attention to the unacceptable nature of the strike and its damaging economic implications:

On behalf of the General Executive Council the men on strike at the London Docks are requested to start work immediately. There is no justification at all for the stoppage if constitutional machinery has been used. Any refusal

¹⁶Cmd.8236, para. 36. Wapping was approximately one mile downstream from Regent's Canal Dock, where the Zinc Oxide piece-rate dispute had taken place. Both were situated on the North bank of the river.

¹⁷PRO: LAB 10/783, J.G. Whitlock, unpublished departmental account of the June 1948 strike; Steve Peak, *Troops in Strikes*, p.93.

¹⁸*Manchester Guardian*, 15-17 June 1948; *The Times*, 17 June 1948.

¹⁹PRO: BK 2/72, Port Workers Strike Committee, *The Men's Own Case*.

to carry out the decision of the properly established appeals machinery will result in a permanent disadvantage to the men concerned. There is no justification for continuing the present stoppage. Above all any prolongation of the dispute will have the effect of seriously affecting vital food supplies and cause great losses to the country and the people. The members of the Union are expected loyally to carry out this request of their own Executive Council.²⁰

Later that day the Union called a meeting in Hackney's Victoria Park, to secure the return to work demanded by its morning press release. When Harvey and Condon from the local TGWU Docks Group arrived to address the gathering, the 300 or so men who had assembled immediately walked off, leaving the hapless officials to address a small group of reporters.²¹ Having chosen to gather in the park, it is unclear exactly why these 300 men were unwilling to listen to the TGWU officials, although it is quite possible that the walk-off was deliberately designed to humiliate Harvey and Condon. Certainly a senior civil servant at the Ministry of Labour, J.G. Whitlock, was moved to describe the event as 'a fiasco'.²²

The Union officials thus humiliated were evidently much chastened by developments. Harvey in particular appears to have been shaken by the obvious lack of control which he had over his members. On 19 June, in the company of Platt, he visited the Assistant Port Manager, Saunders, at the London Dock Labour Board. During the meeting Harvey 'stated that the position generally had assumed serious proportions as the "unofficial people" had now set up a "No name organisation"'.²³

From the information on the unofficial leaders which Harvey and Platt provided, Saunders duly compiled a list of men who belonged to this 'No Name Organisation', which he passed to the Ministry of Labour on 23 June, four days after the meeting at the London Board.²⁴ The list was by no means a complete record of the men who served on the strike committee, for it contained twenty-one names, whilst it would appear from allegations made by Arthur Deakin - also on 23 June - that the committee's membership exceeded forty.²⁵ It is significant, however, that in February 1949, when

²⁰PRO: LAB 10/783, copy of TGWU Press Statement, 18 June 1948.

²¹*The Times*, 19 June 1948.

²²PRO: LAB 10/783, Whitlock account of strike.

²³PRO: BK 2/72, minutes of meeting at the LDLB between Saunders, Platt and Harvey on 19 June.

²⁴PRO: LAB 10/783, London Regional Industrial Relations Officer to Stillwell, 23 June 1948.

²⁵*The Times*, 24 June 1948.

the TGWU held an inquiry into the activities of the unofficial group during the 1948 strike, only seventeen men were called to give evidence.²⁶ These seventeen represented the entire TGWU complement which Saunders listed as belonging to the 'No Name Organisation'. Of the other four, three were members of the Stevedores' Union, with another individual - a man called Dixon - somewhat mysteriously characterised as 'Not Yet Identified'.²⁷ At the TGWU investigation in 1949 each of the seventeen men confirmed that he had belonged to the strike committee.²⁸ This suggests that Harvey's original characterisation of the unofficial committee - the 'No Name Organisation' - as a covert body was false. Those who assumed unofficial leadership did so unambiguously, making no apparent effort to conceal their identities from journalists, police detectives or Ministry of Labour industrial relations officers. They certainly did not operate in a mysterious or secretive fashion.

Harvey's attitude towards the strike organisation was perhaps a measure of his demoralisation, for the list which Saunders compiled indicated the extent to which the unofficial movement challenged the Union's authority. Its composition was drawn from all four upstream sectors of the Port of London - the London, Surrey Commercial, West and East India and Millwall, and the Royal Docks. There was the important additional factor of the committee including members of the Stevedores' Union as well as the TGWU. The three Stevedores' Union men listed were Donovan, Aylward and Pullen. Like Aylward, Pullen was a senior figure in the Stevedores' Union. Both in fact were members of its Joint Executive Council in 1948.²⁹

However, in leading the unofficial strike all three Stevedores' men were, like their TGWU brothers, operating in defiance of their official leaders. Unofficial activity was as roundly condemned in the small Stevedores Union as it was within the mighty TGWU. The Stevedores' General Secretary, Dickie Barrett, was anxious throughout the dispute to

²⁶MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/27, TGWU General Executive Council, Appendix III, 28 February 1949. This investigation is discussed in the following chapter.

²⁷PRO: LAB 10/783, London Regional Industrial Relations Officer to Stillwell, 23 June 1948.

²⁸MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/27, TGWU General Executive Council, Appendix III, 28 February 1949.

²⁹PRO: LAB 10/783, London Regional Industrial Relations Officer to Stillwell, 23 June 1948.

secure a general resumption of work. On 26 June he appeared at a meeting in the Surrey Commercial Docks along with Deakin of the TGWU and Thomas of the Lightermen's Union, and urged the men to call off the strike immediately.³⁰

Moreover, though once the strike was over Barrett allowed Pullen's actions to pass unchecked, he rounded on his other dissident colleague, Bert Aylward. This was probably due to Aylward's persistent involvement in unofficial activity. In 1947, it will be remembered, he had been reprimanded by the Stevedore Union's Executive for his role in the unofficial opposition to the manner of the Dock Labour Scheme's introduction.³¹ There seems also to have been personal hostility between Barrett and Aylward. At the Stevedore Union's Joint Executive meeting on 18 August 1948, Barrett baldly stated that he did not intend to call any further Joint Executive meetings whilst Aylward remained a member. Faced with this ultimatum the meeting voted marginally - three votes to two - to remove Aylward from the Joint Executive Council and the Dockers Sectional Committee of the Union. The minutes of the meeting, alas, do not record the identity of the individual brave enough to side with Aylward against the General Secretary.³²

At the London Board on 19 June, in addition to providing information on the membership of the strike leaders, Harvey also told Saunders that he had met them, and spoke of his belief that 'drastic all-round face-saving action' was necessary. He advocated the suspension of the penalties 'pending a discussion by the National Joint Council of amendments to the Scheme'. This meeting with the unofficial leaders, and Harvey's plea for a compromise solution, recalled the manner in which the Docker's Charter strike had been resolved, without undue embarrassment to Union officials or the unofficial movement. On this occasion, however, as Harvey evidently anticipated in recognising that his position would not be popular at Transport House,³³ the Union leadership was in no mood to compromise. Determined to defend the Scheme which it jointly administered, the TGWU

³⁰*Manchester Guardian*, 28 June 1948.

³¹NMLH/NASDU Joint Executive Council Minutes, 11 June 1947.

³²NMLH/NASDU Joint Executive Council Minutes, 18 August 1948. The leadership of the Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers' Union comprised two Sectional Committees - the Stevedores and the Dockers - which were subordinate to the Joint Executive Council.

³³PRO: BK 2/72, minutes of meeting at the LDLB between Saunders, Platt and Harvey on 19 June.

fully endorsed the National Dock Labour Board's denial that the gang had, as the unofficial movement claimed, been harshly treated. On 23 June the NDLB stated its position:

It is said that the penalty of thirteen weeks disentitlement was severe. Obviously in a port in which the likelihood of obtaining full employment is slight, this might be so, but the eleven men concerned are members of a preference gang. They work to a regular line of ships and are among the first to be selected for work. Their average earnings during the preceding twelve months were about £9 per week. On an average they are not employed for one-half day a week, for which they get 5/-. The disentitlement therefore, in effect, would be about 5/- per week, after the seven days' suspension.³⁴

This calculation of the financial penalties as they affected members of Coe's gang may have been perfectly true. However, it rather lightly wrote off the £9 which each man, on average, would forfeit during the week of unpaid suspension. The Board's statement also failed to reassure other workers who might be paid and employed less than Coe's gang, that they would not be severely treated if they fell foul of the Scheme's disciplinary measures. This much was recognised by the TGWU General Secretary Arthur Deakin. Although in general publicly bullish in his attitude throughout the dispute, at a National Dock Board meeting after the strike had finished, Deakin asserted that the London Board's initial penal verdict on 9 June had been foolish.³⁵

Indeed on one occasion during the dispute Deakin indicated a limited amount of sympathy with the strikers' position. At an official Union meeting held in the Albert Hall on 22 June, the General Secretary gave an undertaking that at the National Docks Delegate Conference scheduled for August, the subject of the Dock Labour Scheme's disciplinary machinery would be examined. In the meantime, however, he insisted that the men had to accept the findings of the constitutional machinery on this occasion, and return to work.³⁶ The Albert Hall meeting, at which the Union claimed there was an attendance of 4000 men, also closed with a resolution carried in favour of an immediate resumption of work.

³⁴PRO: BK 2/72, NDLB press release, 23 June 1948.

³⁵PRO: BK 2/72, NDLB, 1 July 1948.

³⁶'The Facts About the Unofficial Strike of London Dockers', *Transport and General Workers' Record*, July 1948.

The likelihood that this resolution would be effective was discounted by a rival meeting which also took place on 22 June. Organised by the unofficial committee and held at Victoria Park in Hackney on the other side of London, it was addressed by a veteran of the 1945 strike, Harry Constable, and attended by a crowd exceeding 5,000. This meeting voted to continue with the stoppage.³⁷

On the same day, 22 June, the executive council of the employers' association directly involved in the dispute was also holding a meeting. The London Association of Public Wharfingers privately confirmed that, throughout the dispute, the employers had been 'entirely in the right', the Short Sea Traders' 3s4d per ton piece-rate on the zinc oxide had been ample, and it had been fixed with due attention to agreed negotiating procedure. The Chairman of the Public Wharfingers' labour committee, Parsons, expressed regret that Deakin's efforts in the Albert Hall had been negated by the 'rebel element' at Victoria Park. He suggested to his colleagues that the rebels' only complaint could be that: 'the View Committee had not seen the cargo actually working, but this could be discounted, as experienced men were able to judge whether a cargo was bad or not, by seeing it in the hold or craft. The Trade Union member had in fact seen it working ...'.³⁸ This was not quite the entire story, of course. The Trade Union member concerned - Platt - had agreed to the 3s4d rate by telephone, before he had seen the cargo either being worked or idle in the barges from which it was being loaded on to the *Thiems*.

Arthur Deakin had ignored a challenge from the unofficial movement to address the men in Victoria Park,³⁹ and his somewhat curious decision to hold an official meeting in South Kensington, several miles away from the docks, was raised in Cabinet. The strike was evidently straining relations between the Union and the Government. Ministers noted 'evidence that the Union had not been sufficiently active in trying to persuade the men to abandon the strike, and [that] it was reported that the strikers had expressed resentment at being summoned to attend the Union meeting at the Albert Hall'.⁴⁰

³⁷*The Times*, 23 June 1948. *The Times* suggested that as few as 2,000 may have been in the Albert Hall.

³⁸LML/LWA 73, London Association of Public Wharfingers Ltd, Executive Council meeting, 22 June 1948.

³⁹*The Times*, 23 June 1948.

⁴⁰PRO: CAB 128/CM(48)42, 24 June 1948.

The General Secretary did make two appearances in the docks later on in the dispute, at Southwark Park on 25 June, and at the Surrey Commercial Docks on the following day. On both occasions, as the *Daily Worker*, the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Times* all concur, he received a generally unfavourable response, and certainly despite his personal appeals the men failed to go back to work.⁴¹

Private misgivings about Deakin's handling of the dispute did not prevent the Government from rigorously condemning the strike, and insisting that it was causing untold damage to collective bargaining machinery and the economic and social life of the nation. This view was also forcibly expressed in a Union press statement of 18 June, which was summarised in a *Daily Herald* editorial of 19 June. Under the heading, 'DOCKERS AND DOLLARS,' the paper stated that the strike posed a double-edged threat. With dollar exports essential for the purchase of rations, raw materials and machinery, a hundred or so of the ships being held up were dollar earners; and in maintaining an unofficial strike the men were attacking rather than upholding trade union principles.⁴²

On 21 June, the day before the official Albert Hall and unofficial Victoria Park meetings, two important meetings had taken place in Whitehall. Firstly, an inter-departmental gathering of senior civil servants had discussed arrangements for dealing with the strike. According to minutes taken by Frank Newsam of the Home Office, the officials were primarily concerned with perishable food supplies, mainly eggs and tomatoes, which were in danger of rotting. The meeting agreed that if Arthur Deakin failed to secure a return to work at the Union meeting scheduled for the next day, troops would have to be used to move these supplies. The officials also decided that troops so deployed could not be withdrawn after moving the food. With 136 ships immobilised, Newsam further minuted, the strike was having a 'serious effect on our export campaign and our shipping earnings', the loss of the latter running at \$170,000 daily. The troops were thus to continue working in the docks until the strike was over.⁴³ It should be noted that Newsam, promoted in 1948 from Deputy Under Secretary to replace Maxwell as Permanent Under

⁴¹*Daily Worker*, the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Times*, 26 and 28 June 1948.

⁴²*Daily Herald*, 19 June 1948.

⁴³PRO: CAB 21/2653, 'Dock Strike'. Report by the Chairman of the Emergencies Co-ordinating Committee (Frank Newsam).

Secretary at the Home Office, had great experience in organised strike-breaking. In 1926 he had been private secretary to the then Permanent Under Secretary, Sir John Anderson, and had regularly attended meetings of the Supply and Transport Organisation, the Government committee which directed military and voluntary civilian labour throughout the General Strike.⁴⁴

This official committee of 21 June evidently set the agenda for a second important meeting that day of the Cabinet Emergencies Committee. Its attention was initially drawn to the food supplies which the officials had discussed earlier, and in line with the feelings expressed by Newsam and his colleagues, the ministerial committee also believed that troops would have to be introduced to rescue these supplies. However, the Ministers in addition were concerned to bolster the position of the Union, and recognised the difficulties of deploying service labour. The Food Minister, John Strachey, suggested that the introduction of servicemen might precipitate sympathetic strike action amongst the Smithfield meat porters. Noting that the official Union meeting at the Albert Hall was to take place on the following day, 'it was generally agreed that the Union must be given an opportunity to seek a settlement and that to preserve their authority action to move troops should not be taken until it was quite clear that the Union could do nothing more.'⁴⁵

Cabinet discussed the strike for the first time on the next morning. With George Isaacs away, attending the International Labour Organisation Conference in San Francisco, the Ministry of Labour was represented by the Parliamentary Secretary, Ness Edwards. Edwards informed his senior colleagues that Bevin, who was holidaying on the English Channel and not present at that morning's Cabinet,⁴⁶ had told him that a case existed for reviewing the disciplinary machinery in the London area. This strongly indicates the likelihood that Deakin had consulted Bevin before making his Albert Hall announcement on the future working of the disciplinary machinery. Edwards also reported that Deakin had conceded that if the

⁴⁴Jeffery and Hennessy, *op.cit.*, p.148.

⁴⁵PRO: CAB 134/175 Cabinet Emergencies Committee (hereafter EC) of 21 June 1948; besides Ede, the Ministers present were the Minister of Defence, A.V. Alexander, Strachey, the Scottish Secretary, Arthur Woodburn, the Attorney General, Sir Hartley Shawcross, and Ness Edwards, Parliamentary Secretary at the MoL, who was deputising for Isaacs.

⁴⁶Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin. Foreign Secretary*, p.575.

strike did continue, then there would be no alternative to the introduction of troops.⁴⁷

Although Edwards spoke in place of Isaacs in Cabinet meetings for the remainder of the dispute, Attlee himself deputised for his absent Minister in the House of Commons. On the afternoon of 22 June the Prime Minister related the apparently hopeful outcome of the Albert Hall meeting which had ended earlier with the resolution to resume work having been carried. He also pointed out that a continuation of the stoppage 'would have serious effects on the national economy and it will be essential that the goods accumulated at the docks should be handled with the utmost expedition.'⁴⁸ Attlee insisted that Willie Gallacher's claim, that 6,000 men in Victoria Park had taken an opposite decision to those gathered in South Kensington, was 'quite wrong'. This drew an angry response from Bessie Braddock, who had just returned from Victoria Park. According to her account there had in fact been 7,000 bone fide trade unionists present, all of whom had 'held up their union cards, stating that until the withdrawal of the penalties that have been imposed, they would not be prepared to return to work'.⁴⁹

Despite Attlee's optimistic statement, the Government had more or less immediately accepted that no general resumption of work was likely to be imminent. In line with the Emergencies Committee decision of 21 June, on 23 June 300 troops were sent to the West India Docks in Poplar, where they loaded civilian lorries with the perishable food cargoes.⁵⁰ On the same afternoon the Ministry of Food issued a press statement which spelt out the strike's implications for food supplies in London. Consumers would have to accept half of their meat ration in canned form, as abundant supplies of fresh meat were being held up in the refrigerated holds of blockaded vessels. There was, however, no danger of these frozen carcasses being lost.⁵¹

Speaking in the House of Commons on 23 June, Attlee explained that the deployment of service labour was the only way to protect people's food supplies. He then sought to defend the TGWU, re-emphasising the benefits

⁴⁷PRO: CAB 128/CM(48)41, 22 June 1948.

⁴⁸*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.452, 1138, 22 June 1948.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Manchester Guardian*, 24 June 1948.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

which the Dock Scheme - jointly administered by the unions - had brought to the workforce. By remaining on strike the men endangered the Scheme and therefore themselves: 'Unless the members of trade unions use the machinery which has been set up with their agreement, the whole Scheme, which is of immense value to the worker, may be jeopardised. Further, the position won for the trade unions by so much sacrifice in the past is endangered by action of this kind.'⁵²

This statement summarised the impatient, yet generally cautious, initial response of the labour movement's leaders to the strike. Appeals for a resumption of work had been made largely in terms of the damage being caused to the economy and to the Union itself, through the abandonment of agreements which it was party to. The Government supported the Union in its attempts to defend its position in the docks. When Willie Gallacher asked the Prime Minister on 24 June to meet the representatives of the men on strike, he was dismissed with a characteristically curt response: 'The short answer is that there is no question of meeting the men's representatives. The union representatives have been met by the Ministry of Labour.'⁵³

As the strike entered its second week, however, political and industrial leaders stepped up the offensive, and attacks on the strike leaders were broadened to include charges of political subversion. These charges were to carry a particular resonance owing to the political storm which was gathering over another European capital, several hundred miles to the east.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: 'THE GRAVEST DAYS SINCE THE WAR'?

On 24 June, with the number of men on strike still exceeding 19,000, from Transport House Arthur Deakin asserted that the unofficial committee established ten days previously was politically motivated. Of its forty-eight members, thirty-seven were said to be communists or 'fellow-travellers'.⁵⁴ The General Secretary's implication was that the dispute had been hijacked by conspiratorial forces intent on maximising trade disruption and political instability. The next day, 25 June, in Southwark Park Deakin spoke near the docks for the first time during the strike, and was more open with

⁵²*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.452, 1364, 23 June 1948.

⁵³*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.452, 1566, 24 June 1948.

⁵⁴*The Times*, 25 June 1948.

these charges, telling the unofficial committee, 'You cannot challenge the State and you cannot challenge the Government.' The strike committee responded by claiming that twenty-seven of its members held no party affiliation, with ten of them being Labour men and five Communist.⁵⁵

It is possible to extract information on the political character of the strike leadership from the 'No Name Organisation' list put together on 19 June by Saunders of the London dock board with the assistance of the TGWU officials Harvey and Platt. This list contained no note about political allegiance, but during the 1949 strike the London Dock Labour Board produced a list of prominent figures in the unofficial movement which did include the political orientation of its participants.⁵⁶ Obviously many of those involved in the latter dispute were also involved in 1948, and by juxtaposing the two lists it is possible to note that amongst the twenty-one stated as belonging to the 1948 'No Name Organisation', only a handful were actually communists. These included Bert Aylward of the Stevedores Union, Harry Constable and two TGWU shop stewards, Ted Dickens and C.H. Saunders. However, the alleged 'Organiser' of the committee, H.J. Vanloo, who was also a TGWU shop steward, was a Labour Councillor in Stepney. In fact, the Regional Industrial Relations Officer who was responsible for passing the 'No Name Organisation' information on to the Ministry of Labour, was moved to concede that the 'organisation is a very mixed bag indeed and includes, I am told, people who are not extremists'.⁵⁷

Scepticism about the alleged role of communism in the dispute had also been expressed in the Cabinet Emergencies Committee on 21 June. Ministers present noted that, although Arthur Deakin 'was of opinion that the strike was of a political nature, no evidence was available to support this view'. The minutes continued: 'Scotland Yard was of opinion that the strike was not being fomented by Communists, but there was some

⁵⁵*The Times*, 26 June 1948. The strike committee's figures on political affiliation total 42. The missing six are partially explained in a subsequent paragraph.

⁵⁶PRO: BK 2/76, London Dock Labour Board list of 4 August 1949.

⁵⁷PRO: LAB 10/783, London Regional Industrial Relations Officer, whose name is illegible, to Stillwell at the Industrial Relations Department of MLNS on 23 June. Ted Dickens (born 1907) and C.H. Saunders were, along with Harry Constable, active in the 1949 strike. This activity, and its consequences, are discussed in the following chapters.

indication that the Communist Party was beginning to take an interest in it for political purposes.⁵⁸

Moreover, the employers, it should also be emphasised, appear to have made no reference - in public or private - to the involvement of communists in the dispute. They were only of the opinion that the 'rebel element' had to be tamed. On 24 June - the day of Deakin's red smear - the Port Employers in London met to discuss developments. The question of political involvement was not directly discussed. All the Chairman, R.H. Senior, said was that employers 'were gravely concerned with the continued hold up of shipping and the repercussions which were bound to ensue for many months to come,' and that the Government was being pressed to clear the ships blockaded and guarantee the Port's normal operation.⁵⁹

The possibility of communist intrigue was further raised on 24 June, when Anthony Eden sent the Prime Minister a note which he had received from the Conservative member for Melton, Anthony Nutting. This note detailed a mysterious telephone call which had reached Nutting at the House on the previous day from an anonymous individual, one 'Mr. X', who claimed to be a disillusioned communist unable to tolerate the Party's 'anti-British' activities any longer. 'Mr. X' claimed that the dock strike had been organised by the British Communist Party on the advice of Monsieur Zarov, a prominent Cominform official from Yugoslavia. Zarov had apparently addressed a number of communist-orientated dockers' representatives at the headquarters of the British Soviet Society, informing his audience that the Cominform had chosen the British Party to spearhead the campaign against Marshall Aid, with unspecified agitation to be mounted on all fronts. The dock strike had immediately followed this meeting. 'Mr. X' went on to describe a meeting held on the night of 22 June of communist trade unionists, including TGWU members, at which it had been agreed that all possible measures would be taken to prolong the stoppage in the docks and maximise tension within other unions besides the TGWU.⁶⁰

It is unlikely that the Government's thinking was significantly influenced by the case of 'Mr.X'. The substance of his claims - which would probably be impossible definitively to prove or disprove - was certainly

⁵⁸PRO: CAB 134/175, EC, 21 June 1948.

⁵⁹LML/LWA 73, Port Employers in London, 24 June 1948.

⁶⁰PRO: PREM 8/1086, Nutting to Eden, 23 June 1948.

never given a public airing by Ministers. It seems probable that Attlee concurred with the sentiment expressed in Eden's letter of enclosure, which advised that although the matter was worthy of investigation, there was possibly 'nothing in all of this'.⁶¹ However, the approximate scenario presented by Nutting's mysterious contact was partially endorsed by six well-publicised resignations from the unofficial committee, which took place on 25 June.⁶² Two of those who abandoned the strike, Bernard Duhig and Frank Palmer, explained their reasons for doing so in terms of what they saw as the political direction which the strike was now taking. In a press statement bearing the imprint of the TGWU, the pair spoke of 'sinister events behind the scenes', and raised the spectre of the strike unseating the Government which had achieved so much on behalf of the labour movement:

We are fully aware of the grave effects of the strike on the nation's economy and we fear that the situation is being exploited for irrelevant political ends. Our experience as members of the original strike committee - now almost entirely dominated by Communists and their fellow travellers - makes it clear to us that their intention is to extend the strike to other ports and industries and so disrupt the country's economic life as to bring about the downfall of the Government. We therefore urge the Government in its own and in the community's interest to take swift steps to end the deadlock.⁶³

There is no evidence that Government ministers now considered the link between the London dock strike and wider ideological pressures to be hard and fast. However, an emergency gathering of ministers, which convened late in the evening of 24 June, did implicitly recognise that the strike was indirectly associated with the deepening ideological crisis in Europe. The main item on the agenda was the situation in Berlin, which the Soviet forces in Germany had blockaded that morning in response to the introduction by Britain, France and the United States of a reformed currency in the Berlin areas under their control. Due to the crisis in Berlin Bevin had cut short his holiday, and with the aid of a Royal Navy torpedo boat was back in London in time for this 10 p.m. meeting.⁶⁴ With the return

⁶¹PRO: PREM 8/1086, Eden to Attlee, 24 June 1948.

⁶²Thus Deakin could speak of a forty-eight member unofficial committee, and the unofficial committee could number themselves as forty-two.

⁶³*Manchester Guardian*, 26 June 1948. Neither Duhig and Palmer were on the London Board's 'No Name Organisation'.

⁶⁴Bullock, *op.cit.*, p.575.

of Bevin, the Government's position on the dock strike immediately hardened, for the meeting gave consideration to both the London and Berlin situations. In each city, according to Bevin, the Government's political authority was at stake, and both problems required an extremely tough response. In addition to the few hundred troops already unloading food supplies in the West India Docks, that afternoon Cabinet had ordered a further total of 6,000 servicemen to prepare themselves for deployment in the docks on the following Monday, 28 June.⁶⁵ This had raised the fear expressed in the Emergencies Committee on 21 June about the possibility of the strike escalating as a result of service labour being introduced. Bevin dismissed these misgivings unequivocally:

there must be no sign of weakness on the part of the Government: they must show their determination to maintain the distribution of essential foodstuffs. They should not be deterred by threats that, if further troops were employed, the strike would spread to the meat markets. If the strikers got their way, the Government would be at the mercy of unofficial strikers for many years to come. Whether the strike continued for one week or five, no concessions should be made by the Government until the men had returned to work.

For Bevin it was essential that events in Berlin were met with equal pugnacity. To abandon Berlin now would ultimately involve abandoning the whole of Germany, placing Western Europe and Britain in mortal danger: 'If we now showed signs of weakness, we were in danger of being forced out of Europe. If we took a strong line ... the Russians would in the end come to terms.'⁶⁶

Did Clement Attlee really only ever read the births, marriages, deaths and cricket scores in *The Times*?⁶⁷ If so, then the Prime Minister would have been unaware of a remarkable leader column which the paper carried five days after the meeting at which Bevin had implicitly compared the London and Berlin crises. More graphically than Bevin, on 29 June *The Times* solemnly expressed the view that the strike was endangering Britain's survival at a pivotal moment in international history:

These may turn out to be the gravest days since the war. Strikers in the docks are seeking to blockade Britain as surely as the Russians on the other side of Europe are already besieging Berlin: and the margin of safety in

⁶⁵Peak, op.cit., p.93.

⁶⁶PRO: CAB 130/38, meeting of Ministers, 24 June 1948.

⁶⁷Peter Hennessy, *Never Again*, p.199.

essential supplies is not greatly wider here than in the unhappy German capital. ... The dock strike does not only aim a mortal blow at the country's food; it cuts off merchants from their markets and factories from their raw materials, and threatens to undo all the work of months in building up exports to ward off insolvency. It is a challenge to be resisted as resolutely as the threat of an attack by a foreign power.⁶⁸

The Government did not take its lead on industrial disputes and international strategy from the editorial staff at *The Times*. The editorial does reinforce the point, however, that the 1948 dock strike was unfolding against an economic, international and ideological background that was very different from that of October 1945.

A STATE OF EMERGENCY

On Saturday 19 June, five days after the unofficial strike had begun in the London docks, Clement Attlee had addressed a gathering of Labour and Co-operative Movement workers in the capital. He warned his audience of 'subversive elements' within the labour movement, more explicitly referring to the spread of communism in Europe being brought about by people 'with a certain creed [who] enforce that creed on others.' He continued, 'There is a danger in this and a great danger in all our organisations because, unless you are vigilant, you may find your organisation has been captured by a small and active minority. And the bigger your organisation the greater the danger.'⁶⁹ Attlee returned to this theme in a national radio broadcast on the evening of Monday 28 June, in which he explained a dramatic decision which the Government had taken earlier in the day.

Early that Monday morning, approximately 1600 soldiers, who had been brought to London over the weekend in anticipation of the strike's continuation, were sent to discharge food cargoes in Poplar.⁷⁰ Later on in the morning, the Cabinet discussed the dispute's other weekend developments. On Saturday a crowd of approximately 4,500 in Victoria Park had passed a vote of confidence in the unofficial committee.⁷¹ On Sunday afternoon the situation had deteriorated seriously, with the strike

⁶⁸*The Times*, 29 June 1948.

⁶⁹Attlee speech of 19 June, *Manchester Guardian*, 21 June 1948.

⁷⁰Peak, *op.cit.*, p.93.

⁷¹PRO: LAB 10/783, Whitlock to Gould, 26 June 1948.

spreading to Merseyside. A meeting of 2,000 Liverpool dockers had listened to speeches from Harry Constable and C.H. Saunders, and duly voted in favour of a sympathetic strike. Although Deakin insisted that this decision was unrepresentative of the mood locally,⁷² 9,000 dockers - approximately half of the Merseyside workforce - were supporting this action on the Monday morning. Ministers also heard reports that the strike was possibly about to spread to Glasgow and Southampton.

In these circumstances Cabinet managed to convince itself that conspiratorial forces were at work. It concluded that there was 'a powerful organisation behind the strike and some reason to regard it as part of a general attempt to create industrial unrest. It seemed to be the object of the organisers to make the Dock Labour Scheme unworkable and thus to create a state of affairs in which the movement of goods would be liable to constant interruption through dock strikes.'⁷³

Whether by this it was meant that a formal organisation - the British Communist Party, for instance - was behind the strike, or simply that the unofficial strike committee was evidently well-organised, is not clear from the minutes. What is beyond dispute is that the Government was now determined to bring the strike to a rapid conclusion. Consideration was given to a paper prepared by Ness Edwards. The Labour Ministry's Parliamentary Secretary proposed that the Dock Labour Scheme be temporarily suspended in the Port of London. This, he felt, would make dockers realise that if they ignored the Scheme's obligations, then they would also have to forego its benefits. Suspension would have the additional benefit of allowing employers to recruit volunteers for the clearance of the congested ships.⁷⁴ A brief discussion of this paper prefaced its rejection. As Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy have pointed out, no Cabinet which Ernest Bevin belonged to would countenance the suspension of the Scheme which he regarded as his own personal triumph.⁷⁵ However, Bevin's inextricable association with the Scheme did ensure that the Government would take stern steps to defend it, as he himself had demanded four days previously.

⁷²*The Times*, 28 June 1948.

⁷³PRO: CAB 128/CM(48)44, 28 June 1948.

⁷⁴PRO: CAB 129/CP(48)168, 28 June 1948.

⁷⁵Jeffery and Hennessy, *op.cit.*, p.192.

This took the form of a remarkable decision to declare a State of Emergency under the 1920 Emergency Powers Act. Thus did a Labour Government bring into operation powers which had not been used since helping to inflict the terrible defeat upon the labour movement in 1926. The minutes recording this initiative stated the 'desirable' nature of powers which would 'give a firm legal basis for the use [and accommodation] of troops'.⁷⁶ This was, of course, entirely disingenuous. In August 1945 the Cabinet had agreed to retain selected war-time Emergency Powers for five more years, with the Supplies and Services Act,⁷⁷ and under these provisions some 23,000 troops had been mobilised during the October 1945 strike.

The Cabinet Emergencies Committee met on the afternoon of 28 June to consider which provisions of the 1920 Act were to be utilised. Ministers present were informed that the Commissioner of Police considered the temper of the strikers to be good, and that there was no need for regulations relating to public safety and order. The situation was akin to the one in October 1945, when there had been no animosity between dockers and servicemen. Leaving this advice aside, however, Aneurin Bevan urged toughness, suggesting that it would be prudent to wield more wide-ranging powers, lest relations between the strikers and the military deteriorate.⁷⁸ Sedition and the disaffection of servicemen were duly covered by the widely drawn regulations, which were signed by George VI that evening at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, and which were to become law on Thursday 1 July.⁷⁹

In the House of Commons on 28 June, Clement Attlee explained why the Government had decided to use Lloyd George's strike-breaking legislation against the dockers. He stressed that the Government held a responsibility to protect the wider community from the effects of a strike which had been mounted by dockers without regard to their own social

⁷⁶PRO: CAB 128/CM(48)44, 28 June 1948.

⁷⁷Jeffery and Hennessy, *op.cit.*, p.150.

⁷⁸Bevan had been a regular on the Emergencies Committee since its inception in 1947, although this was his only attendance during the 1948 strike. Jeffery and Hennessy, *op.cit.*, pp. 148-180, trace the evolution of the Emergencies Committee from its pre-war antecedent, the Supply and Transport Organisation.

⁷⁹PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 28 June 1948. The Lord President of the Council, Herbert Morrison, was represented at the Holyrood Palace Privy Council meeting by Arthur Woodburn, *The Times*, 29 June 1948.

obligations: 'The irresponsible action of a section of the workers is endangering the regular supply of food to the people and is inflicting grave injuries on the nation.'⁸⁰

In a wireless broadcast to the nation that same evening, Attlee expanded on the reasons behind the introduction of the Emergency Powers. One recent historian of industrial unrest in the post-1945 period has suggested that this broadcast was written by Ernest Bevin,⁸¹ and whilst this remains a matter of conjecture, its broad outlines were certainly drafted with Cabinet approval. Attlee was specifically set the task of emphasising the value of the British system of collective bargaining, where agreements *had* to be honoured on both sides of industry,⁸² and he duly offered a vigorous defence of the Dock Labour Scheme and the Union. In so doing he appealed to the class solidarity of the dockers, and to their duty to support the Labour Government by going back to work:

This Government has decided on full employment. Full employment is the greatest benefit to all our people. Everybody in the country - whether docker or any other worker - must continue to give us the output. We depend on transport, shipping and the movement of goods to keep up this output. Therefore, this strike is not a strike against capitalists or employers. It is a strike against your mates, a strike against the housewife, a strike against the ordinary common people who have difficulties enough now to manage on their shilling's worth of meat and the other rationed commodities. ... The Government owes a duty to the public, and where the food of the people and the economic life of the country are endangered, it must use all the means at its disposal to safeguard them ... The ships which bring our food from overseas are held up and the exports on which we depend to pay for our food and raw materials are not sent abroad. The Government cannot allow this to continue. They have therefore proclaimed a state of emergency in order that they may have the necessary powers to safeguard the life of the country.

Having restated the hazardous economic perspective facing Britain, and illustrated how this was being exacerbated by the strike, Attlee then described the strike as a threat to Britain's worthy and unparalleled collective bargaining system, which was dependent on each side of industry honouring existing agreements. These agreements would be undermined if the Government in any way seemed to bargain with or

⁸⁰*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 452, 1840, 28 June 1948.

⁸¹Justin Davis-Smith, *The Attlee and Churchill Administrations and Industrial Unrest 1944-55*, p.75.

⁸²PRO: PREM 8/1086, note entitled 'Points Agreed Upon by Cabinet for the PM's Broadcast', 28 June 1948.

recognise the unofficial strike leaders. He spoke of the Dock Labour Scheme's immeasurable benefits to the workforce, contrasting the situation prevailing in 1948 with the misery of the interwar years, when economic depression had combined with the casual system of labour relations to cause so much unemployment and poverty in dock communities. Attlee insisted that in accepting the new benefits of the Scheme, dockers had also to accept new obligations in the workplace and in the community: 'You must work the cargoes available. You must carry out reasonable orders. You must turn up at the proper times. This nation, which is trying to maintain full employment, must not only undertake obligations to the people, but it must demand from the people discipline and duty and responsibility.'

Attlee also emphasised the conspiratorial nature of the strike. The unofficial leaders were people without genuine influence:

just a small nucleus who had been instructed for political reasons to take advantage of every little disturbance that takes place to cause the disruption of British economy, British trade, to undermine the Government and to destroy Britain's position ... agitators ... interested not in improving their conditions but in destroying the only agencies by which their conditions have been improved and can be further improved - the trade unions and the Labour Government.

The ten minute broadcast, recently described by Anthony Howard as Attlee's 'straight talk to the lads',⁸³ concluded with the Prime Minister making a final, direct appeal to the men on strike: 'Your clear duty to yourselves, to your fellow citizens and to your country is to return to work.'⁸⁴

On the following morning, 29 June, the strike committee convened a meeting of around 6,000 dock workers in Victoria Park. Charles Riddell, a TGWU shop steward in the London Docks, read out a resolution calling for an end to the strike. Blessed by Coe's gang, the resolution was accepted almost unanimously on a show of union cards. It was a strong statement of future intent, however, as well as present sentiment:

In view of the complete line up of the reactionary forces against us and considering the complacent attitude of the responsible parties - that is, the employers, the higher trade union officials, and the Government - we, the strike committee, are recommending all our men to work tomorrow,

⁸³'Brothers', BBC Radio 4, 5 January 1993.

⁸⁴Full text of Attlee's speech, which was broadcast at 9 p.m. on 28 June 1948 and again at 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. on 29 June 1948, in *Daily Herald*, 29 June 1948.

Wednesday at 8 a.m. We do not expect the authorities concerned to deal out the punishment which we and they agree is harsh and vicious, and we demand a public enquiry into the scheme with special reference to clause 16 [the clause containing penal sanctions for maintaining discipline]. We view the orderly return as the first step in the reorganisation of our respective trade unions and the realisation of our aims by the National Joint Council. We expect that there will be no victimisation in any shape or form.⁸⁵

THE CHARACTER OF THE STRIKE

Cabinet regarded the resumption of work with the utmost satisfaction, viewing the reversal of the situation as a result of the introduction of Emergency Powers and Attlee's broadcast. The decision was also taken to forego any formal inquiry into the strike, Bevin preferring to keep any discussion on the future of the Scheme strictly on an informal basis.⁸⁶ To do otherwise would have been to undermine the Scheme and the Union which the Government had steadily been defending throughout the previous fortnight.

Contemporary observers generally shared the belief that the impact of Attlee's broadcast had been decisive. The *Manchester Guardian* described the men's vote for a return to work on 29 June as a personal triumph for the Prime Minister, and *The Telegraph* recorded that Attlee's prestige was high as a result of the dispute's sudden resolution. Only the *Daily Mail* was critical from a right-wing perspective, rejecting as nonsense the notion that Attlee's force of personality had been crucial: 'What mainly broke the strike was the Emergency Powers Act - and the dockers' fear of empty bellies.' Meanwhile the *Daily Worker*, which described the 1920 Emergency Powers Act as a 'handy weapon against the working class', spoke of the 'Unholy Alliance' of Labour Ministers, Tory Opposition and Trade Union leaders who had 'transformed the strike into a political issue and created a nationwide crisis'.⁸⁷

The *Daily Worker* was not all that far off the mark in its suggestion that the strike had been transformed into a political issue. In November 1945 the *Transport and General Workers' Record* discussed the 'Facts About

⁸⁵*Manchester Guardian*, 30 June 1948. No-one, it should be noted, in official authority had suggested that the penalties were 'harsh and vicious'.

⁸⁶PRO: CAB 128/CM(48)45, 29 June 1948.

⁸⁷The *Manchester Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, 30 June 1948; the *Daily Mail*, 2 July 1948, *Daily Worker*, 29-30 June 1948.

the Dock Strike' in the Docks Group section, tucked away near the back of the journal. In July 1948 the *Record* relayed 'The Facts About the Unofficial Strike of London Dockers' much more prominently, in the General Secretary's monthly personal column, which adorned the middle pages of the paper. Deakin wrote much as Attlee had broadcast, commending the supreme industrial achievements won in building the Union and in creating the Dock Labour Scheme. He overtly stressed that these achievements faced a critical, political challenge:

We know well there are those who desire to break our strength, to discredit the representatives we ourselves have chosen, and to hamper and frustrate the Labour Government. We must expect them to adopt every form of provocation, to exploit and magnify every grievance, and to obscure and distort every issue. We must expect this, but we do not need to fear it. We have within our own Union the means of settling every difficulty, *if the constitutional machinery is understood and used* - as it has not been on this occasion.

The strike, Deakin concluded, had been a tragedy, bringing great suffering down on 'our people' and damaging 'our Government'.⁸⁸ This final reference to the Government of Attlee, MP for the London docklands constituency of Limehouse, and Bevin as the dockers' 'own' Government, was at least partly vindicated by the resumption of work. Attlee's appeal to the men's class loyalty and solidarity had met with a response which indicated a significant amount of goodwill towards the Labour Government amongst the London dockers. This much is indicated in an interesting note made by J.G. Whitlock of the Ministry of Labour on the unofficial meeting which voted for a resumption of work. According to Whitlock, when one of the speakers, Stan Smith, 'apparently dodged his brief and risked an attack on the Prime Minister, there developed a murmur of disapproval which quickly spread through the whole assembly. Unwisely continuing [and generally denigrating the Government] Smith was finally howled down and disappeared, none too gracefully, from the platform.'⁸⁹

The strike also demonstrated, however, the survival amongst the dock workforce of peculiar patterns of class loyalty and solidarity. As John

⁸⁸'The Facts About the Unofficial Strike of London Dockers', *Transport and General Workers' Record*, July 1948. Original emphasis.

⁸⁹PRO: LAB 10/783, Whitlock account of strike. Smith was described in the Saunders/Harvey/Platt list as the 'Secretary' of the 'No Name Organisation'. A TGWU shop steward, according to Whitlock, Smith was also a communist.

Lovell points out, dock workers have primarily expressed these values within their own communities, rather than within the wider labour movement;⁹⁰ and the workforce's commitment to the local men who comprised the unofficial committee was incontestable. *The Times* noted with a hint of irritation, 'An unsatisfactory feature of the way the strike has ended is that the unofficial leaders, while they have not secured any kind of recognition outside, have kept their hold on the leadership to the end. They have succeeded in maintaining their control of the men throughout the strike, and it is they who have ordered the men back to work.'⁹¹ This fact, that the unofficial leaders retained the confidence of the men as they returned to work, was recognised at the Ministry of Labour, with Whitlock observing that the unofficial committee's influence was particularly strong in the Royal Docks area.⁹²

The existence of this lively and active unofficial movement reflected the traditional difficulties encountered by the TGWU in solidly organising dock workers. The Union leadership was, of course, aware that the Scheme had placed its relationship with the dockers on a more fragile basis. In the aftermath of the stoppage Deakin fulfilled his promise of 22 June to review the disciplinary procedures of the Scheme. In August a National Docks Delegate Conference decided that any period of suspension from the benefits of the Scheme should not exceed 14 days, as opposed to the three months originally given to the 'zinc oxide' gang on 9 June.⁹³ The employers' representatives on the National Dock Labour Board accepted the need for limited revision, and on 9 November the maximum period of disentitlement to the Scheme's benefits was fixed at four weeks.⁹⁴

The Union's Docks Group seems to have been less willing to accept that the strike revealed genuine tensions within the workplace or particular faults in the Scheme. Holding its first meeting to discuss the strike on the afternoon of its conclusion, the National Committee lamely concluded that, 'the Union should endeavour to acquire its own Loud-Speaker apparatus in order that in future meetings in the open air could be conducted reasonably and properly.'⁹⁵

⁹⁰John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp. 214-18.

⁹¹*The Times* leader column, 30 June 1948.

⁹²PRO: LAB 10/783, Whitlock to Tennant, 29 June 1948.

⁹³MRC/MSS.126/1/1/26, TGWU General Executive Council, 24 August 1948.

⁹⁴PRO: BK 2/255, NDLB, 9 November 1948.

⁹⁵DNTGC, 29 June 1948.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the port employers who had entered the Dock Scheme with such reluctance in 1947, were much more willing than the TGWU Docks Group to draw wider lessons from the strike. There is definite evidence that their position was hardened by the experience, unwilling as they were to leave their commercial activities vulnerable to future disruption at the hands of the 'rebel element'. On 29 June, the day on which the strike was ended, the Port Employers in London established a special sub-committee to consider three things: how to avoid a repetition of the strike; future arrangements for presenting the employers' opinions to the press; and, perhaps most significantly, to consider modifications to the Dock Labour Scheme, 'should it come under review'.⁹⁶ This committee's favoured 'modifications' to the Scheme were to emerge in the wake of the 1949 dock strike, as part of the employers' contribution to an informal yet serious debate about the future of the Dock Labour Scheme, which involved various Government departments as well as the Unions. This debate (discussed in chapter six of this thesis) was to subject the labour alliance to an increasingly significant amount of internal tension.

⁹⁶LML/LWA 73, Port Employers in London, 29 June 1948.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CANADIAN SEAMEN STRIKES, MAY-JULY 1949

A COLD WAR EPISODE WHICH HISTORIANS HAVE ONLY HALF-REMEMBERED?

The third large-scale docks dispute of the 1945-51 period was more widespread than the 'Zinc Oxide' strike of June 1948. But although it involved a number of ports, it cost the industry less than half the days which had been lost during the 'Dockers' Charter' strike of 1945. The 1949 trouble centred on several Canadian vessels docked in Britain, which were apparently the subject of an industrial dispute between the Canadian Seamen's Union and their Canadian employers. Contrary to instructions from the Labour Government, British port employers and Trade Union officials, dockers in five port areas refused to work these ships. At Leith and Southampton, no working days were actually lost as a result of this action, but there were general stoppages in three important dock systems. Between 16 May and 14 June approximately 12,000 workers were involved in a cessation of work in Liverpool and the Bristol Channel ports of Newport, Avonmouth, Portishead and Bristol. This cost the industry 142,000 working days. In a strike on 23 June and from 27 June to 22 July in London, which at its peak involved over 15,000 of the port's 28,000 men, the industry lost a further 264,000 working days.¹

These were the most controversial strikes which the 1945 Government encountered. Ministers and Trade Union leaders cited them as evidence of a communist conspiracy to weaken the Trade Union movement and destabilise the economy at a time of increasing international tension. The Government produced a lengthy White Paper which appeared in the aftermath of the affair. This purported to demonstrate that the communist-led Canadian Seamen's Union had conspired with communist supporters in Britain to persuade British dockers, against their better judgement, to withdraw their labour. This 'cold and deliberate plan' had caused delays 'in the turn round of ships which meant that valuable exports were lost that can never be made up, and the setback to our economic recovery

¹PRO: LAB 34/64, Trade Disputes (All Industries), 1949.

programme was severe'.² In placing the dispute within this Cold War context, the White Paper implied that the 1949 strikes were the most serious since the war, more important even than the 1945 stoppage, which had cost the industry more than one million working days.³

Historians have tended to follow, rather than rebut, this misleading presentation of the 1949 strikes. Keith Jeffery's and Peter Hennessy's work on Government intervention in strikes, *States of Emergency*, devotes twice as much attention to the Canadian seamen's dispute as it does to the Dockers' Charter strike.⁴ Kenneth O. Morgan, whose work scarcely mentions the huge 1945 strike, is more forthcoming about the 1949 affair. Whilst expressing scepticism about the charges of communist involvement, he is convinced about the dispute's 'ideological origins', and that it was the 'most serious crisis on the industrial relations front' which the Government encountered.⁵ Peter Weiler, an American historian who presses the hackneyed argument that Labour in power dampened and frustrated a supposedly militant working class, has shared Morgan's misunderstanding of the dock strikes. He characterises the 'most politically important strike of the postwar period' as an ideological issue, arguing that the Government deliberately constructed the dispute as a Cold War episode in order to discredit the Communist Party of Great Britain and to impose 'traditional measures to overcome the economic crisis' upon the working class.⁶

The attraction of the 1949 strike for historians and the comparative neglect of the 1945 strike, can easily be explained. The Labour Government's response to industrial unrest was clearly entangled with wider economic, ideological and international problems. These problems were more pressing in 1949 than in 1945: in short, as a perceived Cold War episode - with helpings of Transatlantic conspiracy and ideological conflict - the latter dispute invokes spicier historical associations. There is also far more documentary evidence on the 1949 strike. It may be that an easing of the paper shortage in 1949 allowed Whitehall officials more physical space in which to record their concerns. Alternatively, it is more likely that the

²*Review of the British Docks Strikes*, (Cmd. 7851, December 1949), p.3.

³PRO: LAB 34/60, Trade Disputes (All Industries), 1945.

⁴Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy, *States of Emergency*, pp.154-60 and 198-208.

⁵Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-1951*, pp. 375-8.

⁶Peter Weiler, *British Labour and the Cold War*, p.230.

larger amount of paperwork which accumulated in 1949 is a sign that these concerns were more keenly felt than in 1945.

The literature on the 1949 strike is also weakened by its inadequate discussion of events outside London. Jeffery and Hennessy do at least attach significance to the Government's response to developments in Avonmouth.⁷ However, although noting that 'parallel strikes' took place in Liverpool, Morgan's account largely confines the action to London. Weiler's judgements on the Dock Labour Scheme, the Labour Government and the British Communist Party, are extrapolated from the London strike alone. In fact, as the 1949 White Paper and the unpublished official records indicate, the London strike cannot possibly be understood fully without examining 'provincial' developments. Certainly fewer days were lost on the Avon and Mersey, but this was largely because fewer men were employed in these ports than in London. Size is not everything, and during the Avon and Mersey strikes, attitudes towards the dispute were formed that would largely determine the pattern of events in London.

This chapter will rescue the 'provincial' strikes from the darker recesses of historical memory, and so place the better known London strike in its proper context. But London is still the starting point, for the Canadian dispute was prefaced by further evidence of industrial tension and unofficial activity in the nation's largest port system.

TENSION IN LONDON

On 28 February 1949 the TGWU held an Inquiry into the activities of the unofficial movement during the strike of June 1948. A five-man Special Committee, which included Arthur Deakin as an ex-officio member, heard evidence from the seventeen union members who had been named as belonging to the 'No Name organisation' by Dock Board and Union officials on 19 June 1948.⁸ Amongst the seventeen were some familiar names: C.E. Aylward (not Bert Aylward of the Stevedores' Union), Coleman, Constable, Cowley, Dickens, Donovan, Doyle, Fenn, Palmer, Riddell, Saunders, Smith, Upton, Vanloo, Webster, Weeks and White. Not one of these men denied membership of the unofficial committee, but each gave an assurance that the committee was no longer in existence. The Inquiry accepted this in

⁷Jeffery and Hennessy, *op.cit.*, pp. 199-202.

⁸See above, p.98.

good faith, and dismissed any idea of penalising the men. However, the seventeen were warned that repeated unofficial activity would be viewed seriously, and those who had been to Liverpool during the strike were told to expect 'severe disciplinary measures' if they made similar visits in the future.⁹

This conclusion suggested that the unofficial movement had voluntarily disbanded, and that tension in the Port would consequently be abated. Within six weeks several thousand TGWU dock members were, however, once more on unofficial strike in London. The new dispute arose after the National Dock Labour Board decided to remove thirty-three 'ineffective' workers from the London register on 6 March. Eight of these workers were unfit men below the age of sixty-five, two were between the ages of sixty-five and seventy, and the remaining twenty-three were more than seventy years old. The dismissals took effect on 9 April.¹⁰

Four of the 'ineffective' men belonged to the Stevedores Union. In response to the dismissals, on 11 April this Union declared what was the first official strike since the emergency regulation Order 1305 - which prohibited strikes and was still in force - had been passed in 1940.¹¹ On the same afternoon this official protest was supported by an unofficial strike of TGWU members, with Ted Dickens addressing a strike meeting at Customs House fields. On the morning of 13 April a total of 15,021 dockers and stevedores, and 1550 lightermen, were on strike.¹²

Government Ministers were convinced that the 'communist dominated' Stevedores' Union had mounted the strike to disrupt essential services and Marshall Aid,¹³ and also concerned that the official strike might set a damaging precedent.¹⁴ The Attorney General, Sir Hartley Shawcross, duly began collecting evidence of a conspiracy to mount the stoppage, with a view to prosecuting its leaders under Order 1305.¹⁵ At the same time, Ministry of Labour officials held a meeting on 13 April with the

⁹MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/27, TGWU General Executive Council, 28 February 1949, Appendix III, 'Report of a Special Committee on 1948 London Dock Strike'.

¹⁰PRO: LAB 10/831, notes by Ministry Conciliation Officer, W.E. Thomas, 4 and 11 April 1949.

¹¹NMLH/NASDU Joint Executive Committee minutes, 11 April 1949.

¹²PRO: LAB 10/831, notes by W.E. Thomas, 12 and 13 April 1949.

¹³PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 12 April 1949; PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)27, 13 April 1949.

¹⁴PRO: CAB 129/CP(49)88 and CP(49)89, 12 April 1949.

¹⁵PRO: LAB 10/831, Shawcross to Attlee, 13 April 1949.

Stevedores' General Secretary, Dickie Barrett, and formally warned him that Order 1305 would be invoked. On 14 April Barrett informed members of this position at a mass meeting in Victoria Park, and requested an immediate return to work. The Stevedores, together with the TGWU men, resumed work on Saturday 16 April.¹⁶

While the Government regarded the strike as a politically-motivated conspiracy, the men involved saw things differently. As the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent pointed out, the 'combing out' of the thirty-three appeared to set a dangerous precedent. If the principle of altering the registers was conceded, then no-one could regard their own position with any certainty.¹⁷ These fears were indeed justified, for the National Dock Labour Board privately conceded to the Ministry of Labour that the dismissal of the 'ineffective' men was actually part of a longer-term strategy to 'reduce the load they were carrying'.¹⁸

The suspicions that the 'ineffectives' episode aroused - within the Government and amongst the workforce - were of immense importance, contributing to the slow build up of tension that would erupt over the disputed Canadian ships, a number of which were already in British ports at the start of April.

THE CANADIAN DISPUTE

The strikes of May-July involved eight Canadian ships which were subject to a complex industrial dispute that involved Canadian shipowners and two rival unions, the Canadian Seamen's Union and the Seafarers' International Union. The contentious vessels are listed below:¹⁹

<u>Ship</u>	<u>Port</u>	<u>Arrival Date</u>	<u>Union Crew</u>
<i>Seaboard Ranger</i>	Liverpool	27 March	CSU
<i>Gulfside</i>	Avonmouth	28 March	CSU
<i>Ivor Rita</i>	London (Royals)	2 April	British articles
<i>Beaverbrae</i>	London (Royals)	4 April	CSU
<i>Argomont</i>	London (Surrey)	9 April	CSU
<i>Seaboard Trader</i>	Southampton	29 April	CSU
<i>Montreal City</i>	Newport	5 May	SIU
<i>Seaboard Queen</i>	Leith	17 May	SIU

¹⁶Ibid., note by W.E. Thomas, 19 April 1949.

¹⁷*Manchester Guardian*, 16 April 1949.

¹⁸PRO: LAB 10/831, W.E. Thomas note of conversation with Hogger of the NDLB, 12 April 1949.

¹⁹Cmd. 7851, Appendix VI.

The Canadian dispute began in October 1948, when an agreement between the CSU and Canadian East Coast (Deep-Sea) Shipowners on pay and conditions expired. With union and employers deadlocked on a replacement agreement, the Canadian Minister of Labour, Humphrey Mitchell, appointed a three-member Conciliation Board which reported to him in February 1949. The Board's general suggestion was that both sides accept for one year the terms which had expired the previous October. Although the shipowners agreed to this on 28 February, the union rejected it on 28 March,²⁰ and in search of better terms organised a sit-in strike on East Coast vessels in Halifax on 21 March. At this point the dispute took a bitter twist, with the shipowners obtaining a Court Order which required the CSU crews to leave their ships. The vessels were crewed instead by members of the Seafarers' International Union, which signed an agreement in accordance with the Conciliation Board's recommendations: in other words, undercutting the CSU.²¹

The SIU was an affiliate of the American Federation of Labour, unlike the CSU which was affiliated to the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. In 1947 the aggressively anti-communist AFL had covertly established the break-away French labour organisation, *Force Ouvrière*, in order to undermine the communist dominated CGT.²² In Canada in 1948-49 the AFL appears to have been involved in a similar operation, albeit on a much smaller scale. With the CSU led by communists, the AFL seemingly exploited the deadlock between the CSU and the East Coast owners to pitch an anti-communist affiliate - hitherto without Canadian membership - into the Canadian shipping labour market at the expense of the communist-led union.

After the deal had been struck between the SIU and the East Coast Shipowners, on 31 March the CSU declared a strike on the East Coast Shipowners' ships. These Canadian events had almost immediate repercussions in Britain. Four days before the CSU strike began, on 27 March, the *Seaboard Ranger* arrived in Liverpool, where dockers began unloading. On 1 April the CSU's British representative, Jack Pope, arrived in Liverpool and instructed his members to go on strike, whereupon the

²⁰PRO: LAB 10/833, Statement issued by Humphrey Mitchell of 16 May 1949, copy sent to Isaacs by Canadian High Commissioner, 23 May 1949.

²¹Cmd. 7851, p.6.

²²Henry Pelling, *Britain and the Marshall Plan*, pp.62-3.

Liverpool men on board also stopped work. Liverpool employers agreed that fresh labour for the Canadian ship would not be requisitioned.²³ At Avonmouth on 28 March the crew of the *Gulfside* went on strike upon arrival, but made no attempt to dissuade dockers from discharging their cargo. This task was completed on 2 April, when the crew was paid off and ordered to leave the ship. In London three East Coast ships docked between 2 and 9 April, two of which, the *Beaverbrae* and the *Argomont*, were crewed by CSU members. The CSU men dissuaded dockers from unloading their cargoes, and that of the third Canadian ship, the British-crewed *Ivor Rita*. As in Liverpool, London employers made no attempt to requisition labour for the disputed ships. Over the next few weeks, other than on the Canadian ships which were left idle, work carried on as normal in Liverpool and Bristol. In London work was disrupted from 11-16 April by the official Stevedores' strike, but this was entirely unrelated to the Canadian issue. About two weeks later, on 29 April, the CSU-crewed *Seaboard Trader* arrived in Southampton. Local dockers indicated that they would not accept direction to the vessel, and employers left it in suspense. The work of the port was not otherwise disrupted.²⁴

During the opening weeks of the CSU strike in Britain, the TGWU made no comment on a dispute in which it was uncomfortably placed. As joint administrator of the Dock Labour Scheme, it was obliged to oversee work on all ships that were not subject to a domestic dispute. At the same time, however, like the CSU, the TGWU was affiliated to the International Transport Workers' Federation. If it insisted that members did work on the disputed vessels, the TGWU would clearly risk undermining the position of its Canadian brothers. This difficulty was apparently removed on 23 April, when the ITWF released the following unambiguous statement:

It is apparent that the strike is not over an industrial issue, but the result of an inter-union conflict. After careful consideration of the matter it was unanimously decided that there was no occasion for unions abroad to interfere in the dispute. This means, on the one hand, that the seafarers' unions affiliated to the International Transport Workers' Federation in Europe will not supply crews for the strike bound ships, but on the other hand, that dockers' unions will not be asked to refuse to handle the cargoes of the ships.²⁵

²³Cmd. 7851, p.8.

²⁴Ibid., p.9.

²⁵Ibid., p.7.

Whilst unambiguously sanctioning work on the Canadian ships in Britain, the ITWF statement also legitimised the presence on these ships of Seafarers' International Union men. The ITWF also provided the SIU with considerable organisational assistance, allowing W.D. Henderson, the SIU's British representative, to work from its London office.²⁶ The TGWU also co-operated closely with the SIU, the two unions holding a joint press conference on 6 May, after trouble had broken out on the Avon. Arthur Bird, who had replaced Jack Donovan as the National Docks Trade Group Secretary at the start of 1948, said on this occasion: 'Here is a row between two unions. We in the British Labour Movement are carrying out the policy of the International Transport Workers' Federation - that is, we are loading and discharging the ships.'²⁷

TROUBLE ON THE AVON

Bird's statement was an unsuccessful attempt to resolve trouble which had begun in the Bristol Channel several days earlier, and which persisted until the middle of June. The ports involved, Avonmouth, Bristol and Portishead, employed only around 2,000 workers. The Ministerial Emergencies Committee monitoring the strike duly observed that the Avon ports were 'not of great importance to the export trade'.²⁸ Of the 400,000 or so days lost between May and July, it should be noted that only about 35,000 were lost in the month-long stoppage on the Avon.²⁹ Nevertheless, the Avon strike was extremely significant, for it prefaced the larger and more damaging stoppages in Liverpool and London.

On 1 May a crew of SIU men arrived in Avonmouth to sail the *Gulfside*, idle since its CSU crew had been sacked on 2 April, back to Canada. To reach the Bristol Channel from Avonmouth, ships had to be manoeuvred by tugboatmen and lockgatemens, but with SIU members aboard the *Gulfside*, these men refused to co-operate, and the Canadian ship remained tied up. On 2 May a general one day stoppage at Avonmouth followed, in protest at the *Gulfside*'s attempted departure.³⁰ This preceded more

²⁶PRO: LAB 10/833, Henderson to Arthur Bird, 5 May 1949.

²⁷Ibid., clipping from *Western Daily Press*, 7 May 1949.

²⁸PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 25 May 1949.

²⁹PRO: BK 2/71, Industrial Disputes, 1949.

³⁰Ibid.

extensive unofficial action on both sides of the Bristol Channel, which stemmed from the arrival in Newport on 5 May of another Canadian East Coast ship, the SIU-crewed *Montreal City*, which had left Canada on 19 April. The *Gulfside's* sacked crew were in Newport on 5 May, and dissuaded dockers from working the *Montreal City*. A two day general stoppage ensued, before local union officials persuaded the Newport men to resume all duties on 8 May, including work on the Canadian ship.³¹

The *Montreal City* made scheduled calls at Barry and Swansea without apparent incident, and sailed to Avonmouth, where it arrived on 14 May. The secretary of the Port of Bristol Employers' Authority, Cross, had anticipated that this arrival would cause trouble, and on 9 May wrote to Macdonald of the National Association of Port Employers, warning that the repercussions of the Canadian dispute would soon be felt throughout the nation. Prompted thus, Macdonald wrote to Gould, the Chief Industrial Commissioner at the Ministry of Labour, requesting Government guidance on the matter, suggesting that 'an appropriate and impartial authority, possibly in this case the Canadian High Commissioner', might be persuaded to issue a public statement on the full facts of the dispute.³²

This anxiety that the dispute was dragging on, was expressed by the employers' representatives when the National Dock Labour Board discussed the situation on 10 May. Its line was that in failing to direct labour to the Canadian ships, Labour Boards in a number of ports were not fulfilling a central obligation of the Dock Labour Scheme. The cost of enforcing the Scheme would be high, however, and the meeting concluded that: 'although the consequences of the Board's present policy, in seeking to limit the numbers of men involved in refusing to work the ships concerned, were serious, the alternative of directing men to employment was likely to create a widespread stoppage which would be damaging to the country.'³³

This exactly anticipated events in Avonmouth, after the local Board directed fifty-five men to the *Montreal City* on 16 May. On 13 May, at an unofficial meeting, the men had pledged not to handle the *Montreal City*. The allocated men only worked the Canadian vessel for two or three hours, before responding to appeals from other dockers to respect the unofficial

³¹Cmd. 7851, p.10.

³²LML/BPA 152, Cross to Macdonald, 9 May 1949; Macdonald to Gould, 11 May 1949.

³³PRO: BK 2/255, NDLB, 10 May 1949.

decision which had been taken three days earlier. The entire port stopped work for the remainder of the day in protest at the Canadian ship having been worked.³⁴

The next day, 17 May, a second unofficial meeting confirmed the workforce's position. The men voted to isolate the *Montreal City* and to continue all other work as normal. The Bristol port employers refused to allow this, however, responding with this resolution: 'No fresh requisitions shall be made from the Dock Labour Board for labour at Avonmouth until the *Montreal City* is manned and working.' This position was conveyed in writing to the local TGWU officials, who convened a mass meeting for 8 a.m. on 18 May. The majority of the 1000 or so workers who attended the meeting rejected the employers' ultimatum, which was regarded as unreasonable. The fifty-five men who were re-allocated to the *Montreal City* refused the work and before the day was out a general stoppage at Avonmouth prevailed.³⁵

Developments at Avonmouth can usefully be contrasted with those at Leith, a port of comparable size with a registered workforce of about 2,000.³⁶ On 17 May an SIU-crewed Canadian ship, the *Seaboard Queen*, arrived in Leith. CSU representatives who had been sent to Edinburgh spoke to the Leith men, who refused to discharge the vessel on 18 May.³⁷ Thereafter the Leith dockers affirmed that whilst they had no wish to go on strike, they were adamant that their boycott of the Canadian ship would not be lifted. The Leith employers, unlike those at Avonmouth, made no attempt to direct labour to the disputed boat, and this more relaxed attitude ensured that the only cargo lost in Scotland was the 1,000 tons of wheat and 3,000 tons of timber carried by the *Seaboard Queen*. The Canadian ship eventually sailed - without unloading - for Bremen on 3 June.³⁸ A similar situation arose at Southampton, after the CSU President, Harry Davis, had spoken outside the dock gates on 16 May. At this impromptu meeting the Southampton men reaffirmed their refusal to work the Canadian ship, the

³⁴Cmd. 7851, pp.10-11.

³⁵PRO: LAB 10/833, report from Bristol Regional Industrial Relations Officer, 18 May.

³⁶PRO: MT 81/15, NDLB Stats 1948-1963.

³⁷Cmd. 7851, p.12.

³⁸PRO: LAB 10/832, Scottish Industrial Relations Officer's memoranda, 21 May and 3 June 1949.

Seaboard Trader, which had been idle since docking on 29 April. The local Dock Board made no attempt to direct labour to this ship.³⁹

In accordance with its usual practice, the Government moved cautiously during the dispute's initial stages. On Thursday 19 May, two days after the Avon stoppage had become general, Attlee discussed the situation with Ernest Bevin. His view was that 'we should hold our hand over the weekend.'⁴⁰ The position was reviewed by a ministerial meeting on Monday 23 May, which Attlee himself chaired. Also present were the Minister of Labour, George Isaacs, the Minister of Transport, Alfred Barnes, the Home Secretary, Chuter Ede, and Philip Noel-Baker, who as Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations was held to be informed about the dispute's Canadian aspects. Isaacs pointed out that the actions of the Avon employers had been unhelpful. He criticised the Canadian shipowners, who had flown across the substitute Seafarers' Union, and the Canadian Seamen's Union. In so doing he emphasised that Harry Davis, whom he described as 'a known communist', had arrived at Avonmouth on 13 May,⁴¹ the day on which the unofficial meeting had voted to isolate the *Montreal City*. Concluding that the involvement of British dockers in this essentially Canadian dispute was not a matter of direct Government concern, the Ministers decided to make no official intervention at this stage. Such action, it was felt, might cause the strike to spread, and would also deny the TGWU an opportunity to reassert its authority amongst its dock members. In the meantime the Ministerial Emergencies Committee was instructed to keep an eye on developments.⁴²

The Cabinet Committee discussed the Government's strategy on the Canadian vessels two days later, on 25 May, and made two highly significant observations. Firstly, in noting the relative economic insignificance of the Avon ports, Ministers also recognised that military resources were extremely limited. This was of central importance, for in the event of a general stoppage in more than one port, troops would simply be unable to maintain supplies of essential services. Secondly, the committee observed that the isolation of the Canadian ships on the Avon was no longer acceptable, since its prolongation would jeopardise the authority of the

³⁹Cmd. 7851, p.14.

⁴⁰PRO: LAB 43/150, Attlee to Isaacs, 19 May 1949.

⁴¹Cmd. 7851, p.10.

⁴²PRO: PREM 8/1081, Ministerial meeting to discuss strike over Canadian ships, 23 May 1949.

employers and the men's official leaders. The conclusion reached was that, 'if at the Government's request, the employers retreated from the attitude they had taken up, the dockers would be able to claim to have won a victory, and they and their Communist instigators would have just what they were after - they would have established *de facto* the right to refuse to work certain ships.' The Government could not tolerate the establishment of such a precedent, for it would threaten the basis of the existing Dock Labour Scheme.⁴³

On 26 May the Emergencies Committee decided that service labour would be used to unload the fifteen ships which were idle at Avonmouth and Bristol.⁴⁴ The work began on 27 May, with troops unloading cargoes in order of priority determined by the Ministries of Food and Transport, the *Montreal City* being ranked eleventh on this list.⁴⁵ These troops were specifically deployed to defend the authority of the Scheme. After servicemen began work on 27 May, a mass meeting of strikers requested that troops immediately discharge the *Montreal City*, so that it could be cleared from the port.⁴⁶ However, the Cabinet Emergencies Committee of 30 May refused to bring forward the *Montreal City's* scheduled clearance. This would be 'impolitic', as the men could resume work without handling the *Montreal City*, having by-passed their obligations under the Scheme and claiming this dereliction of duty as a victory.⁴⁷

A total of 1,200 men from the three services were duly deployed on the Avon, a number approximately half of the usual Avonmouth/Bristol workforce.⁴⁸ On 31 May the SIU-crewed *Gulfside* finally left Avonmouth, its passage cleared not by lightermen and tugmen but by staff of the local Port Authority. In accordance with the original Ministries of Food and Transport schedule, on 7 June troops began work on the *Montreal City*.⁴⁹

⁴³PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 25 May 1949.

⁴⁴Ibid., 26 May 1949.

⁴⁵Cmd. 7851, p.11-12.

⁴⁶PRO: LAB 10/833, note from Bristol Regional Industrial Relations Officer, 28 May 1949.

⁴⁷PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 30 May 1949.

⁴⁸Steve Peak, *Troops in Strikes*, p.94.

⁴⁹Cmd. 7851, p.12; PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 1 June 1949.

ESCALATION: THE STRIKE ON THE MERSEY

On 26 May the Canadian dispute spread to Liverpool. The Mersey docks system employed more than 17,000 registered men, and was of immense economic significance.⁵⁰ Moreover, with the Emergencies Committee committing the limited overall supply of service labour to the Avon ports on the same day, this development was doubly serious.

A Canadian ship, the *Seaboard Ranger*, had been in Liverpool since 27 March, but the immediate cause of trouble in Liverpool was a British ship, the *Dromore*, which had been unloading at Avonmouth when the stoppage began on 17 May. The *Dromore* arrived in Liverpool on 26 May, and about fifty Liverpool dockers began removing its cargo. Having spoken to the *Seaboard Ranger*'s CSU crew in their dinner hour, however, these men refused to go back to the *Dromore*. Since the ship had come from a strike-bound port, they felt that by working it they would be abandoning a basic trade union principle of solidarity with their Avonmouth brothers.⁵¹

The local Dock Labour Board informed the men, via their Union officials, that they would receive no other work until the *Dromore* was cleared. As with the actions of the Avonmouth employers on 16 May, the Liverpool Board's position on 27 May appears to have inflamed the situation. By noon on 27 May about 1000 men were on strike in support of the original fifty, and an unofficial strike committee had been formed. Over the next few days support for the stoppage steadily grew, and by 8 June about 10,000 men had ceased work.⁵² At a special meeting of the Liverpool Dock Labour Board on 31 May, the Union nominees pressed for the *Dromore* to be left idle, and that the men allocated to the *Dromore* be allowed to seek alternative work. However, the Board's chairman, an employer called Hodges, informed the NDLB secretary Parkin, that the employers could not accept this position: 'They [ie the employers] took this attitude quite deliberately in face of the strong possibility that a resumption would have been achieved by leaving the *Dromore* idle until presumably the strike was settled in Avonmouth.'⁵³

⁵⁰PRO: MT 81/15, NDLB Stats 1948-1963.

⁵¹PRO: BK 2/75, Hodges (Secretary, Liverpool board) to Parkin (NDLB), 3 June 1949.

⁵²Cmd. 7851, p.13; PRO: LAB 10/832, Whitlock note on Liverpool situation, 26 May 1949.

⁵³PRO: BK 2/75, Hodges to Parkin, 31 May 1949.

The Government was also aware that the *Dromore* was the only obstacle to a resumption in Liverpool, and aware that the services could do nothing to relieve the strike, the Cabinet initially rejected the inflexible position which it had supported on the Avon. On 2 June George Isaacs was instructed to press the Liverpool employers into isolating the *Dromore*.⁵⁴ The employers, predictably perhaps, rebutted this approach. Furthermore, on 7 June Lord Ammon wrote spikily to Attlee, indicating that the National Board was no longer ambivalent - as it had been on 10 May - about directing dockers to disputed ships. On the question of isolating the *Dromore*, Ammon said:

My opinion and that of my advisers is that this would be a very serious mistake. It would not affect the general problem, which is the unloading of the Canadian ships, but would tend to make matters much worse by discrimination, which would be a very bad precedent ... and confirm the recalcitrant and sabotaging elements in their position.

He continued by urging a tough defence of the Board's obligations under the Scheme:

The Board is being pressed by the owners to supply staffs to unload and in accordance with the terms of the Scheme, we should comply. With the consent of the Government we have ignored the scheme and have agreed that the Canadian ships should be isolated; but this cannot go on indefinitely and the owners are now pressing that they are not willing for this sort of thing to continue unless there are signs that the Government are acting in the matter. My own inclination is to call the bluff or have the showdown, whichever it may turn out to be, and apply the Scheme. It may mean that the men will be glad that at least some definite step is being taken and a workable understanding is arrived at.⁵⁵

This appeal for firmer Government action prevailed, particularly once it had been endorsed by Ernest Bevin. On 9 June he informed Attlee that ships could not be isolated from the Scheme. Attlee told Cabinet colleagues that Bevin 'had most strongly expressed the view that it would be disastrous to let the Unions gain the power of deciding which ships should be unloaded and which not'.⁵⁶ The Government's position was finally determined by an important economic casualty at Liverpool. A substantial cargo of cars was to have been exported to South Africa, but the scheduled vessel for the cars'

⁵⁴PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)40, 2 June 1949.

⁵⁵PRO: BK 2/75, Ammon to Attlee, 7 June 1949.

⁵⁶PRO: CAB 130/46, Ministerial meeting on strike, 10 June 1949.

transportation was blockaded at Avonmouth. In the meantime, the South African Government had introduced new restrictions on car imports, and the sale of the Liverpool cars was lost.⁵⁷

Without the military resources to break the Mersey blockade, Ministers decided to try and bring the strike to an end by repeating the trick which had worked successfully in June 1948, namely a national Ministerial broadcast. On 10 June Attlee suggested to colleagues that if the men on strike were given the facts about the Canadian dispute, and encouraged to consider the damage which their action was causing to the economy and to their Union, the strike would collapse immediately.⁵⁸

Responsibility for the 11 June broadcast on this occasion was given to Isaacs. Telling his audience that he spoke as 'a fellow trade unionist' as well as a member of the Government, he asked the strikers to consider the consequences of their 'ill-advised and irresponsible action', with food for 'our wives and children being lost'. He alleged that a political conspiracy was afoot: 'The plain fact is that the Canadian dispute is being used - and you are being used - by the Communists in this country to dislocate our trade and thus retard our economic recovery.' Isaacs concluded by claiming that the past struggles of dock workers, in building the Union, were being discredited by the present stoppage.⁵⁹

The impact of Isaacs's statement appears to have been almost immediate. According to Jeffery and Hennessy, 'Once again the magic of the wireless worked.'⁶⁰ On 13 June the unofficial leaders on the Avon recommended that the men resume work as normal, including on the *Montreal City*. This they did on 15 June, ending a strike which had lasted twenty-seven days. In Liverpool a full resumption, which included the *Dromore*, was effected even more quickly, on 13 June. At Southampton, after concerted efforts by local TGWU officials, work on the *Seaboard Trader* eventually began on 18 June. This task was completed on 12 July, when the CSU crew agreed to take the vessel back to Canada.⁶¹

⁵⁷PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 30 May and 1 June 1949.

⁵⁸PRO: CAB 130/46, Ministerial meeting on strike, 10 June 1949.

⁵⁹PRO: LAB 43/150, text of Ministerial broadcast, 11 June 1949.

⁶⁰Jeffery and Hennessy, op.cit., p.202.

⁶¹Cmd. 7851, pp.12-14.

LONDON: ANOTHER EMERGENCY?

The National Dock Labour Board considered the resolution of the Avon and Mersey strikes on 13 June. The Board also discussed the two Canadian ships which had been idle in London since 4 April. On 13-14 May about 200 stevedores and dockers had refused allocation to the *Beaverbrae* in the Royal Docks. London employers, unlike those in Bristol, had not forced the issue, with work otherwise continuing as normal, and nor had any attempt been made to direct labour to the *Argomont* in the Surrey Docks. (On 18 May, the *Ivor Rita*, which had arrived in the Royals with a crew under British articles on 2 April, was allowed to leave for Bremen without discharging its cargo.)⁶²

However, following the men's refusal to accept allocation to the *Beaverbrae*, Canadian shipowners had begun pressing the National Board to abandon its cautious position, and have the Scheme fully worked. On 16 May the Board had been contacted by the Goulandris Brothers, the UK representatives of the owners of a number of the Canadian ships, who had stated: 'We are very pleased, but by no means relieved, to note that your Board shares our concern at the delay to these Canadian vessels. We should have been happier if, apart from their sharing our concern, the NDLB also shared the loss to which the owners are being condemned.'⁶³

The extent to which this pressure, containing the implied threat of suing for damages, persuaded the Board to take a tougher stance is unclear. However, the Board had not condemned the Avon employers' ultimatum, and Ammon's letter to Attlee on 7 June which raised the idea of forcing 'a showdown', had certainly indicated that the Board no longer countenanced prudence.

On 13 June Ammon told the rest of the Board that in London, 'the time has now arrived for us to work this Scheme, realising the dangers inherent in any moves we might make.' In other words, labour would be directed to the disputed Canadian ships. With Arthur Bird absent, Dickie Barrett of the Stevedores' Union was the sole dissident from this position, a fact that would assume greater significance as events developed.⁶⁴ Ammon informed Isaacs of the Board's decision, noting that labour would be directed to the

⁶²Ibid., p.15.

⁶³PRO: BK 2/75, Goulandris Brothers to NDLB, 16 May 1949.

⁶⁴Ibid., NDLB, 13 June 1949.

Canadian ships on the following Monday, 20 June.⁶⁵ On 15 June the MoL's Chief Industrial Commissioner, Sir Robert Gould, tacitly supported confrontation. Replying on Isaacs's behalf, he stated that the Government had no wish to influence the Board's actions over the Canadian ships.⁶⁶

On 20 June the Board invoked the decision to direct labour to the *Argomont* and the *Beaverbrae*. This again stirred the opposition of the Stevedores' leader, Dickie Barrett. In accordance with established procedure, members of the Stevedores' Union, as opposed to TGWU members, were bound to perform the initial work on the Canadian ships. This prompted Barrett to remark: 'he knew his position as a Member of the National Board, but said he made his position as a Union Official quite clear. No one would get him to send men to what he said were "black" ships.' But his request that the isolation of the ships be continued was dismissed by the rest of the Board.⁶⁷

As it happened, the free call at the Royal Docks on the morning of 20 June yielded no surplus stevedores, and there was no question of directing labour to the *Beaverbrae*. However, in the Surrey Docks there was a surplus of 300 stevedores, and these men were directed to the *Argomont*.⁶⁸ Barrett duly realised his threat to the Dock Board, telling members in the Surrey Docks that, although as a member of the National Board he was obliged to tell them to work the *Argomont*, as their General Secretary he was obliged to advise them not to. The men refused the allocation.⁶⁹

This official defiance proved to be merely transitory, with Barrett's position changing completely after an interview that afternoon with Sir Robert Gould at the Ministry of Labour. What was said at this meeting is unclear, but given that it ended with Barrett committed to seeking a resumption of work, it might reasonably be assumed that Gould - as he had done two months previously - reminded Barrett of the potential illegality of official strike action under Order 1305.⁷⁰ On 21 June the Stevedores'

⁶⁵Ibid., Ammon to Isaacs, 13 June 1949.

⁶⁶PRO: BK 2/76, Gould to Parkin, 15 June 1949.

⁶⁷Ibid., NDLB, 20 June 1949.

⁶⁸Cmd.7851, p.16.

⁶⁹PRO: LAB 10/904, Thomas (RIRO) report to Andrew, 20 June 1949.

⁷⁰PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, Edwards' report of Gould/Barrett meeting, 21 June 1949.

Executive recommended that its members resume normal work, including both Canadian ships, on the following morning.⁷¹

Contrary to this advice, on 22 June Stevedores in the Surrey Docks refused to work the *Argomont*. In the Royal Docks twenty-six TGWU members accepted allocation to the *Beaverbrae*, handed their books to the employer and set off for the ship. En route - according to Whitlock of the MoL - they were 'intercepted by Dickens and Powell (two well known trouble makers) and persuaded to defer going'.⁷² There was some merit in this testy characterisation of the two men. Ted Dickens, a TGWU shop steward in the Royal Docks, had been active in the recent 'Ineffectives' strike and the 1948 'Zinc Oxide' strike. Thomas Powell, who also worked in the Royals but was a member of the Stevedores Union, had chaired the London strike committee in October 1945.

The London employers' organisation reacted to these developments by resolving to make no fresh engagements of stevedore labour until the Canadian vessels were manned.⁷³ This seemed likely to provoke a general unofficial stoppage throughout the Port of London, but on 23 June an apparent resolution of the Canadian dispute suddenly emerged. Through the Canadian High Commissioner in London, the CSU put a list of proposals to Captain R.W. McMurray, Managing Director of the *Beaverbrae* owners, Canadian Pacific Steamships. The CSU submitted that upon returning to work the strikers would not be victimised, required to join the SIU or prosecuted by the shipowners. Pre-strike pay levels would also be restored. McMurray accepted these conditions on behalf of Messrs. A. Lusti Ltd., agents for the *Argomont*, as well as his own company. The CSU called off the strike on Friday morning, 24 June.⁷⁴

This proved, however, to be another fleeting development. Over the weekend it emerged that the *Argomont* had actually been sold some months previously, was no longer under Canadian ownership and would not be returning to Canada.⁷⁵ The Canadian strike committee in London duly alleged that McMurray had double-crossed them, and at a lunch-time meeting in the Royal Docks on Monday 27 June, CSU representatives asked

⁷¹NMLH/NASDU Joint Executive Council minutes, 21 June 1949.

⁷²PRO: LAB 10/904, Whitlock to Diack, 22 June 1949.

⁷³LML/LWA 73, Port Employers in London, 22 June 1949.

⁷⁴Cmd.7851, pp.16-17.

⁷⁵Ibid., p.18.

dockers not to handle the contested vessels. The employers, meanwhile, had been preparing for a confrontation. On 24 June J.R. Hobhouse, who as a prominent Liverpool shipowner and NDLB member wielded considerable influence, had written to Macdonald of the National Employers' Association. Hobhouse felt that it was time to confront the strikers; it was opportune to 'bring them to battle' he wrote.⁷⁶ With the CSU strike resuming on 27 June, the Port Employers in London decided: 'Should the position revert to a refusal to work only the *Beaverbrae* and the *Argomont* (or either) then the Employers' arrangements to refrain from calling stevedore labour for fresh engagements in the affected docks should be re-introduced as soon as possible.'⁷⁷ When allocations to the two ships were refused in answer to the CSU's appeal, the employers acted as planned, leading to widespread disruption in the Port. By the end of the day, over 2,500 men - stevedores and dockers - were idle in the Surrey and Royal docks.⁷⁸

On 29 June the London Board sanctioned the employers' decision of 27 June, with the further proviso that in the Royal Docks, where work on the *Beaverbrae* required TGWU as well as NASDU labour, no engagements for any labour would be made until the Canadian vessel was being worked.⁷⁹ By this time work had completely stopped in the Surrey and Royal docks, and was considerably disrupted in the West India and Millwall areas.⁸⁰

Between these developments, on the morning of 28 June an unofficial leadership committee was established. According to information compiled by the London Dock Labour Board, the character and composition of the committee broadly replicated that of its 1948 predecessor. Drawn from the various sections of the port, it was chaired by a Stevedore, Albert Timothy, and included many who had previously been involved in the unofficial movement: Thomas Powell of the Stevedores, and Blomberg, Constable, Cronin, Dickens, Stan Smith and Vanloo of the TGWU.⁸¹ One established unofficial stalwart, Bert Aylward, was absent from this London

⁷⁶LML/BPA 243, Hobhouse to Macdonald, 24 June 1949.

⁷⁷LML/LWA 73, Port Employers in London, 27 June 1949.

⁷⁸*Manchester Guardian*, 28 June 1949.

⁷⁹PRO: BK 2/76, London Dock Labour Board minutes, 30 June 1949.

⁸⁰PRO: LAB 10/904, Whitlock to Diack, 29 June 1949.

⁸¹PRO: BK 2/76, 'Brief particulars of Dock Workers known to have been more or less prominent during the Strike', sent from London to National Dock Labour Board, 4 August 1949.

Board list, but his contacts with the unofficial movement were maintained. On 7 August, two weeks after the stoppage had been called off, he addressed an unofficial meeting at Canning Town Hall along with Timothy, Blomberg and Dickens.⁸²

Whilst the CSU had evidently encouraged the London stoppage, the employers' actions had also been of clear importance. This was certainly the line taken by the unofficial 'Lock-out Committee', which printed a pamphlet entitled *We Want Work* on 30 June. This made three claims. Firstly, the stoppage was not an extension of the CSU's campaign, but an expression of the dockers' determination to avoid taking sides in the Canadian dispute. Secondly, it was not a strike: in attempting to force the men to blackleg, the shipowners and the NDLB had locked them out. Finally, the men were 'prepared to demand the right to work all ships outside of those in dispute in accordance with our known custom, practice and tradition, as Trade Unionists'.⁸³

The stoppage continued to escalate, despite the condemnation of both union leaderships. At the TGWU Finance and General Purposes Committee on 30 June, Arthur Deakin informed colleagues that very serious views had been expressed in the port industry's National Joint Council on 22 June. The joint body had emphasised that unofficial strikes 'gravely imperilled' the industry's conciliation machinery and the Dock Labour Scheme.⁸⁴ Deakin put the same point to his dock members in the *Transport and General Workers' Record* on 1 July, warning that the great benefits won by the Union over the years 'must not be imperilled by ill-considered action'.⁸⁵ The Stevedores' Union also took little satisfaction from developments. Further belying his initial belligerence, Barrett invited Captain McMurray, who had been accused by the CSU of double-dealing, to address the Stevedores' Executive on 28 June. Having listened to McMurray, the Executive reaffirmed that its members should resume normal work immediately.⁸⁶

⁸²Ibid., report of Canning Town Hall meeting, 7 August 1949.

⁸³Ibid., Lock-out Committee, *We Want Work*, 30 June 1949.

⁸⁴MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/27, TGWU Finance and General Purposes Committee, 30 June 1949.

⁸⁵'Trade Unionism versus Communism: The Gloves are Off!', *Transport and General Worker's Record*, July 1949.

⁸⁶NMLH/NASDU Joint Executive Council minutes, 28 June 1949.

Despite these entreaties, the number of men on strike continued to grow steadily: 8,209 on 2 July, more than 10,000 on 8 July, 13,000 on 12 July, and over 15,000 on 18 July. Support for the strike remained above 15,000 until it was called off on 23 July.⁸⁷

The Government regarded the London stoppage as a serious threat to the British economy and the Trade Union movement's authority. Ministers also argued that it was a political issue, forced by communists in the CSU and the London docks. On 28 June, the second day of the strike, George Isaacs told the House of Commons:

It is intolerable that our trade and our recovery should be interfered with in this way. It is abundantly clear that the Communists, in their support of the Canadian Seamen's Union, are completely indifferent to the loss and hardship that may be occasioned to our dockers and their families and the rest of the community. These disruptive elements represent only a small minority of the men and the men must realise that unless they assert themselves in loyalty to their Union, they are betraying the interests of the vast majority of their fellow trade unionists.⁸⁸

Isaacs reiterated this statement when challenged by the Communist MP Willie Gallacher, who said that the London strikers were merely expressing loyalty to their Canadian comrades. The Minister asserted that the dockers owed loyalty to their Union and not to 'a lot of imported agitators', whose aim was not to win the Canadian strike but 'to disturb the flow of merchandise in our ports'.⁸⁹

The strike was monitored by the Cabinet Emergencies Committee, which met six times in July. On 4 July it withheld the immediate introduction of troops, feeling that this would cause the strike to spread.⁹⁰ Prior to the committee's next meeting, on 5 July an important exchange of correspondence took place between Ammon and Attlee. Having advocated tough action during the Liverpool strike, Ammon again expressed the need for confrontation: 'It does seem to me that while we are in this difficulty the matter should be fought to a finish.' He recommended a declaration of a State of Emergency, deportation of the 'imported agitators', and the arrest and trial of the strike leaders. Attlee replied by pointing out that there was no evidence to support such prosecutions, nor could the Canadian activists

⁸⁷Cmd.7851, Appendix XIII.

⁸⁸*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 466, 982, 28 June 1949.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 983.

⁹⁰PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 4 July 1949.

be deported, as they were British subjects. Attlee did admit, however, that Ammon's first suggestion - a declaration of an emergency - was being considered.⁹¹

The 1920 Emergency Powers legislation was indeed discussed by the Emergencies Committee on 6 July. The committee agreed that the threat to food supplies and the increasing loss of export trade revenue were sufficiently serious to justify a State of Emergency. It was decided that Ede would recommend to Cabinet that such a proclamation be made on 8 July, with the powers to take effect on 11 July. In the meantime troops would be immediately introduced to move foodstuffs from the docks.⁹²

That afternoon in Parliament, Isaacs said that the introduction of troops to safeguard food was 'necessary without delay'.⁹³ This announcement had been prefaced by a dramatic statement by Sir Stafford Cripps on the growing dollar deficit, which had erupted seriously from £93 million in the first quarter of the year to £157 million in the second quarter of the year.⁹⁴ Having made this statement, Cripps gave a press conference where he spelt out a direct relationship between the London strike and the grim economic news: the country could ill-afford 'the ridiculous luxury of politically-inspired strikes the sole object of which is to destroy our earning powers and bring hardship and misery on our people. We need maximum efficiency and the highest productivity throughout industry. There is no greater inefficiency than unnecessary strikes.'⁹⁵

On 7 July 300 troops at the docks began unloading food cargoes. On the same morning Cabinet accepted Ede's recommendation that a proclamation would have to be made under the 1920 Emergency Powers Act. A dissenting view was expressed, namely that this would be an excessive weapon to utilise for the discharge of two ships. Yet, on the whole, Cabinet's judgement was apparently swayed by the 'grave economic crisis', which made breaking the blockade on Britain's exports essential. The legitimacy of the Dock Labour Scheme was also at issue: 'There could be no compromise on the issue that the dockers must unload ships without discrimination. If

⁹¹PRO: BK 2/76, Ammon/Attlee correspondence, 5 July 1949.

⁹²PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 6 July 1949.

⁹³*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 466, 2163, 6 July 1949.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 2150.

⁹⁵*Manchester Guardian*, 7 July 1949.

the Government once admitted the claim that dockers could decline to unload particular ships, there would be endless difficulties in the future.⁹⁶

The Emergency Committee met again that evening, and affirmed that if normal work was not resumed on the following day, an immediate announcement on Emergency Powers would be made.⁹⁷ With 1,000 troops moving food cargoes on 8 July, the dockers on strike showed no sign of going back. Having consulted Attlee, Isaacs, Bevin and the Emergencies Committee,⁹⁸ Ede announced in Parliament that unless the men went back to work, a State of Emergency under the 1920 Act would take effect on Monday, 11 July.⁹⁹

On 11 July an early morning mass meeting of strikers in Victoria Park elected to ignore the Government and maintain the stoppage. According to the *Manchester Guardian's* labour correspondent, the lock-out committee's handling of the meeting was 'scrupulously fair'. He quoted a lighterman thus: 'I don't mind going home tired after a day's work, but I do demand to go home with a good conscience,' and concluded that the 5,000-strong crowd generally agreed that to unload the Canadian ships would be 'against the collective conscience of the waterfront'.¹⁰⁰

With no sign that the men were preparing to return, on 11 July Cabinet agreed to invoke Emergency Powers for the second time in less than thirteen months and decided to establish a small executive body to direct military and civilian labour in the docks for the duration of the Emergency.¹⁰¹ Known as the Port Emergencies Committee, its composition was settled that afternoon by Alfred Barnes, who had discussed the matter with Attlee, Isaacs and Ede. To chair the committee, Barnes chose Sir Alexander Maxwell, who had been Permanent Under Secretary at the Home Office from 1923 to 1948. As such, he had played a prominent part in directing strike-breaking troops during the General Strike, which suggests to one recent historian that his July 1949 appointment symbolised the traditional nature of the Labour Government's response to industrial

⁹⁶PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)44, 7 July 1949.

⁹⁷PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 7 July 1949.

⁹⁸Ibid., 8 July 1949.

⁹⁹*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 466, 2593, 8 July 1949.

¹⁰⁰*Manchester Guardian*, 12 July 1949.

¹⁰¹PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)45, 11 July 1949.

action.¹⁰² The most senior of the committee's three other members was another retired civil servant, Sir Frederick Leggett, who had occupied a number of senior posts in a distinguished career at the Ministry of Labour between 1917 and 1945.¹⁰³

This new Committee's task was in one respect eased by a Cabinet Emergencies Committee decision on the afternoon of 11 July which had widened the potential responsibilities of service labour. Previously this had been confined to food cargoes: additional troops would now be drafted in to work all cargoes.¹⁰⁴ This allowed for a steady escalation of military involvement in the docks: from around 2,500 on Tuesday 12 July to 5,500 on Friday 15 July. During the fourth and final week of the dispute, the numbers rose from 7,082 on Monday 18 July, to 10,821 on Thursday 21 July. When the strike ended on Saturday 23 July, there were 12,792 troops working on a total of 130 ships throughout the docks.¹⁰⁵

The declaration of an Emergency evidently failed to repeat the trick which had worked in 1948. In fact, the only immediate consequence of the proclamation was to complicate an already confused situation. The existence of the Port Emergencies Committee suggested to many workers that the Dock Labour Scheme had actually been temporarily suspended, and on 12 July the numbers failing to report for work increased from under 11,000, to well over 13,000. The NDLB hastily issued a denial that the Scheme no longer applied, adding: 'dock workers should continue therefore to make themselves available for work at the normal times and places in accordance with the Scheme.'¹⁰⁶

On 13 July Parliament considered the Emergency Powers which had been drawn up. As agreed by Cabinet on 11 July, Attlee opened the debate in order to emphasise the Government's serious intentions.¹⁰⁷ He observed: 'The situation is such as gravely to injure the economy of this country at a critical period in its history.' Continuing his statement with a discussion of the Canadian dispute's origins, Attlee invoked the authority of the Canadian

¹⁰²Justin Davis-Smith, *The Attlee and Churchill Administrations and Industrial Unrest 1945-55*, p.62.

¹⁰³PRO: MT 63/488, Emergency Committee for Port of London, preliminary meeting, 12 July 1949. Biographical information on Leggett, *Who Was Who Vol. VIII, 1981-1990*.

¹⁰⁴PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 11 July 1949.

¹⁰⁵Cmd. 7851, Appendix XIII.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, p.23.

¹⁰⁷PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)45, 11 July 1949.

Trades and Labour Congress, the International Transport Workers' Federation, the TGWU and the NASDU, to indicate that the Canadian ships were not, as the lock-out committee insisted, 'black'. He raised four other points, all of which had been made during the broadcast which had helped to end the 1948 strike. Firstly, the dockers were being manipulated by an irresponsible 'clique' of Communists and 'fellow travellers'. Secondly, the Dock Labour Scheme had 'brought untold benefit to the dock workers', and in return they had 'to take the call and accept the work offered'. Thirdly, 'the great position attained by the trade unions in this country has been due not a little to the fact that they keep agreements entered into, and the whole position of the unions is jeopardised by breaches of agreements such as this.' Finally, the strike was exposing the country to immense economic damage through the loss of the 'external trade on which our people depend for their means of life.' Attlee reasoned that in the circumstances he had described, the Government had no option other than to declare a State of Emergency.¹⁰⁸ This final point was as untrue in 1949 as it had been in 1948, for the 1945 Supplies and Services Act gave the Government enough power to introduce large numbers of troops without invoking the 1920 regulations.¹⁰⁹ Certainly Anthony Eden could legitimately point out, when replying for the Opposition, that Attlee had not specifically indicated what the Government intended to do to bring the dispute to an end.¹¹⁰ Presumably the Government simply hoped that the men on strike would be cowed into submission - as they had been in 1948 - by the proclamation of an Emergency, and the accompanying appeals in terms of the danger which the stoppage posed to the Scheme, the unions and the nation's economic security.

These supposed dangers were put to the strikers by George Isaacs in a BBC broadcast that evening, 13 July. He observed sympathetically that the majority of the men were on strike due to their admirable sense of loyalty, but repeated Attlee's point that the CTLC, the ITWF, the TGWU and the NASDU had all said the ships were not 'black'. Thus, if the men went back to work, they would not be scabs or blacklegs, but defenders of the Scheme, their unions, their families and the country at a time of great economic danger. He asked the men to consider the strike's political character: 'who is to have

¹⁰⁸*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 467, 441-4, 13 July 1949.

¹⁰⁹Jeffery and Hennessy, *op.cit.*, p. 150.

¹¹⁰*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 467, 445, 13 July 1949.

your support? The Nation in its present needs, or the Communists in their opportunity to cause damage and mischief?'¹¹¹

The strikers were also under increased pressure from the TGWU. In the Union journal of 1 July, Deakin had described recent and present unofficial dock strikes as 'merely another facet of the attempt that is being made on the part of international communism to prevent our economic recovery, and especially the flow of American aid to Europe.' He gave notice that Union members involved in these strikes were to be 'given their marching orders'.¹¹²

This end was pursued at the Union's Biennial Delegate Conference, which coincidentally opened at Scarborough on the day that Emergency Powers came into effect, 11 July. On its first day the conference adopted an important change to the Union's constitution: 'No member of the Communist Party shall be eligible to hold any office within the Union, either as a lay member or as a permanent or full-time officer, this rule to take effect as and from the beginning of the 1950/51 electoral period.'¹¹³ This was Deakin's own contribution to the TUC anti-communist campaign which he had helped launch in 1948. In stating the incompatibility of Union activity with Communist membership, it was also an indirect attack on the unofficial movement in the London docks, which contained a number of men who were both TGWU shop stewards and Communist Party members. The rule change represented at least a minor contribution to the attempt to discredit the strike as a communist conspiracy. The strikers were also directly confronted at Scarborough on 14 July, when Deakin tabled an emergency resolution which set out the customary trade union condemnation of unofficial action:

This Biennial Delegate Conference deeply deplores the continuation of the unofficial strike in the London Docks and calls upon the Members involved to resume normal work, declaring that it is their bounden duty to honour the obligations entered into by the Union on their behalf.

Conference places on record the fact that there is no dispute involving wages and conditions, or any other question arising which can be settled by any action on the part of our Members or which justifies any prolongation of the stoppage.

¹¹¹PRO: LAB 10/904, text of Ministerial broadcast, 13 July 1949.

¹¹²'Trade Unionism versus Communism: The Gloves are Off!', *Transport and General Worker's Record*, July 1949.

¹¹³MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/4/13, Report of TGWU Biennial Delegate Conference, 11-15 July 1949, para. 10.

Conference further declares that it is imperative that the Union should carry out its obligations. Our Members should realise this and also the fact that a continuance of the unofficial strike imposes a hardship and burden upon the community at a time when the country is struggling for its very existence.¹¹⁴

Neither this resolution - which was carried by an overwhelming majority - nor the banning of communists from official positions within the Union, weakened the strikers' resolve. With these men resisting pressure from both Government and Union leaders to work the Canadian ships, the dispute had seemingly reached an impasse, for the Government position was equally inflexible. From the Cabinet Emergencies Committee of 15 July it is clear that Ministers knew the dispute would last only as long as the *Beaverbrae* and *Argomont* were in London. Yet they were prepared to discuss the prospect of sending 20,000 troops to the docks rather than concede the strikers' demand. Indeed, it was stated as a 'matter of principle' that troops would not discharge the Canadian ships until all other vessels had been cleared.¹¹⁵

This inflexibility rested uneasily with the Government's insistence that a national emergency was afoot. On 8 July, after Ede had announced that an Emergency would be proclaimed on the following Monday, Ronald Chamberlain, a Labour back-bencher, said that the immediate unloading of the Canadian ships by troops would 'be a matter of ordinary worldly wisdom'.¹¹⁶ The *Manchester Guardian* also advocated this strategy, which would terminate the stoppage and immediately halt the losses of vital export trade. The paper condemned the Government's refusal to do this as irrational obstinacy.¹¹⁷

Whilst the Government was unanimous in its refusal to move the disputed ships first, the stoppage temporarily re-opened the inter-departmental conflict which had been evident during the introduction of the Dock Labour Scheme. In 1947 senior Ministry of Transport officials had expressed misgivings about unions enjoying an equal share in the Scheme's administration. On 18 July Cabinet considered a paper from Transport Minister Alfred Barnes, suggesting that the strike indicated possible faults in the Scheme's administration which had to be investigated.

¹¹⁴Ibid., para. 54.

¹¹⁵PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 15 July 1949.

¹¹⁶*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 466, 2594, 8 July 1949.

¹¹⁷*Manchester Guardian*, 14 and 16 July 1949.

The rival Ministry of Labour argument, that such an inquiry was unnecessary, was put by George Isaacs. He said that industrial disputes in the docks were the responsibility of the industry's National Joint Council, rather than the National Dock Labour Board.¹¹⁸

Discussion on the competing papers was pre-empted in the short-term by Ernest Bevin, who said that if the Government announced the type of inquiry which the MoT requested, 'Grave disquiet was bound to be aroused among dock workers throughout the country.'¹¹⁹ As ever, Bevin was motivated by the desire to protect the Scheme which had built upon his personal achievements as TGWU General Secretary and Minister of Labour. Bevin was also prepared to be tough, as he had been during the 1948 strike, and when informing Attlee in June 1949 that it would be disastrous if the workforce could determine which ships they would and would not work.¹²⁰ The toughness with which Bevin and the Government regarded unofficial action reflected the concern that it threatened the economy and therefore full employment; but it also rested on the conceived damage being done to the Scheme's credibility, and therefore to the TGWU. In the longer-term, however, Ministry of Transport pressure for a review of the Scheme was not permanently lifted by Bevin's intervention. This pressure, and the strains which it imposed on the Government's relationship with the TGWU, will further be discussed in the final chapters of this thesis.

TROUBLE WITH THE NDLB

With the Government being tough only in order to protect the Scheme, the TGWU and, if perhaps indirectly, the workforce itself, a furious public row developed between Cabinet Ministers and the National Dock Labour Board during the fourth week of the London stoppage.

The week began on Sunday 17 July, when the lock-out committee held a march from Canning Town in the East End to a rally in Trafalgar Square where the refusal to work the Canadian ships was reaffirmed. An interesting insight into the demonstrators' loyalties was provided by the *Manchester Guardian's* labour correspondent. He observed that, 'The marchers had sung "The Red Flag" with gusto, but they carried a Union

¹¹⁸PRO: CAB 129/CP(49)145 and CP(49)151, 18 July 1949.

¹¹⁹PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)46, 18 July 1949.

¹²⁰PRO: CAB 130/46, Ministerial meeting, 10 June 1949.

Jack at the head of all their banners.' In Trafalgar Square the crowd was addressed by the leftist MP, John Platts-Mills, and Albert Timothy, the unofficial committee's chairman. The correspondent also stated that the event, held in very heavy rain, was an 'impressive demonstration of the London dockers' solidarity in their strike'.¹²¹

The men's continued refusal to resume work exacerbated the deep sense of frustration already felt by the National Dock Labour Board over the Government's inability to end the strike. Tension between the Board and the Government had already been evident with Ammon advocating a tougher line than Attlee on 5 July, and it had been the Board which forced the issue of directing labour to the Canadian ships. On 12 July at a meeting with Ministry of Labour and TGWU officials, the Board sought agreement on a new strategy of confrontation. The Ministry's Chief Industrial Commissioner, Sir Robert Gould, asked what could be done to kill the 'virus' that caused unofficial action in the docks. Parkin of the Board suggested that each striker could be sent a notice, specifying that if he failed to resume work by a particular date, he would be dismissed from the Scheme.¹²²

This course of action was agreed by the Board on Friday 15 July,¹²³ with Ammon making this intention clear to the Port Emergency Committee at a morning meeting on Monday 19 July. Maxwell felt that issuing dismissal notices would simply make matters worse, transforming the strike into an emotive defence of victimised dockers. Leggett also opposed the Board's idea, saying that in his professional experience, employers who sacked men *en masse* generally had to re-engage them *en masse*.¹²⁴

Ammon ignored this advice, and dispatched an angry note to the Prime Minister about the meeting. 'Might I say in passing,' he wrote, 'that "Emergency" as the name of the Committee seems a joke.' Reiterating his determination to issue a statement that would secure a resumption, he protested 'that there seems to be no powers whereby those who foment and encourage the continuance of the strike can be brought to book'.¹²⁵

¹²¹*Manchester Guardian*, 18 July 1949.

¹²²PRO: BK 2/76, meeting at Ministry of Labour, 12 July 1949.

¹²³PRO: BK 2/255 NDLB, 15 July 1949.

¹²⁴PRO: BK 2/76, Port Emergency Committee meeting with Lord Ammon, 19 July 1949.

¹²⁵PRO: PREM 8/1081, Ammon to Attlee, 19 July 1949.

When the NDLB met that afternoon, Arthur Bird suggested that the issue of dismissal notices would be ineffective so long as the fifty or so 'trouble-makers' held the confidence of the workforce. The rest of the Board brushed this aside, however, and decided to issue - in the form of a press release - an ultimatum to the strikers. A long statement was produced, which expressed dissatisfaction that 15,000 men in London were refusing to honour existing national and local agreements. The argument that men who worked on the Canadian vessels would be black-legs was strongly rejected:

The board, being responsible for the allocation of dock workers to employment, (a) does not and will not allocate men to any job unless the terms and conditions are in accord with national and local dock agreements; (b) does not and will not allocate men to any job which is in dispute so long as the proper machinery of negotiation as laid down in national and local dock agreements is being followed. ...

... Any dispute between the shipowners and the unions on the east coast of Canada cannot be settled by the National Joint Council for the port transport industry.

Adding - disingenuously, given Bird's minuted misgivings - that the notice had been fully agreed by all the Board's members, the statement concluded with an ultimatum:

In view of the foregoing statement the National Board hereby orders all dock workers now on strike to resume work at 7.45 am on Thursday, July 21. Failure to return to work will jeopardize the very existence of the scheme which former dock workers have struggled to achieve. The board urges them to respect this loyalty to workers of the past and thus help to safeguard the benefits of the scheme for their sons.¹²⁶

The statement was broadcast on the 9 p.m. news. Alarmed by what was implied about the Dock Labour Scheme's future, Attlee, Isaacs and Ede held urgent talks, which three hours later produced a rival Government statement:

The attention of the Government has been called to the notice issued by the National Dock Labour Board. This notice, which was issued without the authority of the Emergency Committee, implies that the continuance of the dock labour scheme may be in jeopardy. The Government are entirely in agreement with the board that all men should return to work at the earliest possible moment and they are aware that many men are desirous of doing so, but the Government think it right to state that they are not

¹²⁶*The Times*, 20 July 1949.

contemplating taking any steps to bring to an end the national dock labour scheme.¹²⁷

On 20 July the NDLB noted 'with grave concern the hasty action taken by the Government amounting to a repudiation of the Board's reasonable statement of policy and instructions for a resumption of work'.¹²⁸ Ammon was personally bewildered by the turn of events. Interviewed by journalists, he attacked Ministers who had 'crabbed a real chance of getting a resumption of work'. This opportunity had been 'kicked to bits' by the 'panicky' Downing Street statement: 'Why the Government have gone crazy and done what they have done I don't know'.¹²⁹ The *Manchester Guardian* regarded Ammon's confusion as justifiable, pointing out that the Government had condemned the Board for simply repeating Ministerial warnings about the future of the Scheme.¹³⁰

For their part Ministers were furious that Ammon had been disloyal to the Government which he served as Chief Whip in the Lords. In September 1945, when Ammon had been appointed to the Government, Bevin told him that the two roles were ultimately irreconcilable.¹³¹ It had taken almost four years, but on 21 July Cabinet reflected on Ammon's recent behaviour and agreed that Bevin had been right. After meetings with Attlee, Isaacs and Ede on 20 July, he had apparently adopted a 'more accommodating attitude', yet on the morning of 21 July, his fresh attacks had appeared in the press. 'There was general agreement that it was wholly improper that Lord Ammon, while still a member of the Government, should make public statements which were critical of the Government's handling of this matter; and that this situation should be remedied without delay'.¹³² That afternoon Attlee asked Ammon to leave the Government. There being no question of his leaving the NDLB, Ammon dutifully resigned his Government post on the evening of 21 July.¹³³

¹²⁷Ibid.

¹²⁸PRO: BK 2/255, NDLB, 20 July 1949.

¹²⁹*The Times*, 21 July 1949.

¹³⁰*Manchester Guardian*, 21 July 1949.

¹³¹PRO: FO 800/491, Bevin to Ammon, 3 September 1945.

¹³²PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)47, 21 July 1949.

¹³³*The Times*, 22 July 1949.

TERMINATION OF THE STRIKE: AGITATORS, FOMENTERS AND MUSIC FACERS

A first sign that the strike might be coming to an end had actually arrived before the NDLB's ultimatum. On 19 July the lock-out committee had stated its intention to hold a public meeting in Victoria Park on Friday morning, 22 July. All interested parties - Ministry of Labour and trade union officials, the CSU and the Canadian crews - were challenged to attend.¹³⁴ A portent of what this meeting might hold arrived on 21 July, the day after the row between the NDLB and the Government, when the TGWU secured the attendance of around 1,000 strikers at an official meeting at the West India Dock. These men voted overwhelmingly to resume work on Monday 25 July.¹³⁵

The Victoria Park meeting began at 7.45 am on 22 July, and attracted the attendance of several thousand strikers. It began with a sudden announcement from the CSU president, Harry Davis, that his Union was calling off its strike in Great Britain. He stated, misleadingly as it turned out, that the Canadian Deputy Minister of Labour had offered fresh conciliation on the original dispute. This offer had in fact been made on 27 June, and was no longer valid,¹³⁶ which suggests that the CSU was tactically withdrawing whilst the support of the London men remained intact. The lock-out committee duly recommended a resumption of work in victorious terms. With the Canadian Union no longer on strike, the *Beaverbrae* and the *Argomont* were no longer 'black', and men could resume work on these ships without violating 'trade union principles'. This was unanimously accepted by the meeting, and the men resolved to resume all work on Monday morning, 25 July.¹³⁷

Normal work was indeed resumed as the unofficial meeting had pledged, but this was not accepted with complete satisfaction by the Board or port employers, who were unhappy that the dispute had ended with the men's faith in the unofficial leaders unshaken. In a statement to his fellow peers on 27 July, Lord Ammon claimed that full credit for the resumption of work was owed to the NDLB, for the ultimatum which it had issued. He also

¹³⁴Ibid., 20 July 1949.

¹³⁵Cmd.7851, p.25.

¹³⁶Ibid., p.26.

¹³⁷*The Times*, 23 July 1949.

criticised the Government for failing to act against the 'fomenters' of the strike, which he had urged Attlee to do as early as 5 July. In allowing these men to go unpunished Ministers had merely stored up problems for the future.¹³⁸

The Port Employers in London held similarly pessimistic views about both the manner in which the strike had ended, and the prospects for a peaceful future in the docks. Less than three hours after the men had voted to return, the local employers' organisation expressed a determination to confront the dockworkers' unofficial leaders. It was 'agreed that early representations should be made to the London Dock Labour Board for the removal of known agitators from the Port Register'.¹³⁹

Neither was the institution which had most to fear from the unofficial movement, the TGWU, particularly pleased with the strike's outcome. With the Union's authority having again been usurped in the docks, Arthur Deakin was even angrier than Lord Ammon and the employers. On 21 July he told the Union's Docks Group that the presence of unofficial leaders would no longer be tolerated:

there were certain people who would be dealt with and they would not be dealt with sympathetically, they must face the music. He had been taunted with being too easy when dealing with certain people who had been attempting to destroy the good will in the Industry. Be that as it may, whatever the consequence he would be no party to any lenient treatment so far as certain people were concerned, they had set out to bring this Union into discredit, they had sought to dishonour and disrupt. These people would be put out of the Scheme, he would go this far if people would not act decently. We could not afford to throw away the hardwon gains that the Dock Employees enjoy at the moment.¹⁴⁰

The London strike had again illustrated that there was in existence a core of vigorous and determined unofficial leaders, who commanded a level of trust and support amongst sections of the workforce which the TGWU palpably did not. The stoppages at Avonmouth and Liverpool had also signalled the continuing inability of the TGWU to organise coherently a diverse national and industrial workforce. At the Biennial Delegate Conference Deakin had fulfilled his promise to give communist shop stewards their 'marching orders', and banished them from Union office.

¹³⁸*House of Lords*, Vol. 164, 557-65, 27 July 1949.

¹³⁹LML/LWA 73, Port Employers in London, 22 July 1949.

¹⁴⁰DNTGC, 21 July 1949.

Now he was to turn the Union's organisational wrath against the unofficial core of 'certain people' who were to be 'dealt with' in London. This important sequel to the 1949 dispute is discussed in the final chapter, which examines the strains which the unofficial strikes exerted on the labour alliance. This is preceded, however, by an analysis of the character of these strikes.

CHAPTER SIX

COMMUNIST CONSPIRACIES? THE ALLEGATIONS AND THE REALITY

STRIKES AS POLITICAL SUBVERSION

The association between unofficial strike action and political subversion was initially made by Arthur Deakin, the TGWU General Secretary, during the huge Dockers' Charter strike of October 1945. He accused the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party of 'encouraging and maintaining the strike action'.¹ During the London strike of June 1948, Deakin perceived an altogether different political conspiracy. Claiming that the vast majority of the unofficial committee were communists, he hinted that the stoppage - in disrupting trade in Britain's busiest port - was part of international communism's attempt to undermine Britain's economic and international standing.² On this occasion, in contrast to 1945, his charges of subversion were publicly supported by the Government. In his national broadcast on the State of Emergency, Clement Attlee described the strike leaders as 'a small nucleus' of 'agitators', who were intent on pulling the TGWU apart and disrupting Britain's recovery.³

Allegations of communist involvement were made even more explicitly during the 1949 strikes. When the Ministerial Emergencies Committee discussed the Stevedores' official strike in April, George Isaacs stated that the 'Communist-dominated' union was seeking to embarrass the Government,⁴ and the Cabinet believed that communists on the union's executive were deliberately attempting to disrupt essential services and impede the delivery of Marshall Aid.⁵ The communist conspiracy theme enjoyed particular lustre during the strikes in support of the Canadian Seamen's Union, which began a few weeks later at Avonmouth on 16 May. On 23 May Isaacs informed fellow Ministers that the CSU's President, Harry Davis, who had arrived at Avonmouth on 13 May, was 'a known Communist',

¹*The Times*, 13 October 1945.

²*The Times*, 25 June 1948.

³*Daily Herald*, 29 June 1948.

⁴PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 12 April 1949.

⁵PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)27, 13 April 1949.

who 'had been extremely active in stirring up trouble among British dockers'.⁶ On 26 May Chuter Ede told Cabinet colleagues that the seamen's strike was designed to interfere with 'the shipment of supplies under the European Recovery Campaign'; they agreed that the affair 'illustrated the need for a more general campaign to put the dockers and other workers in this country on their guard against this sort of Communist exploitation'.⁷

Ministry of Labour officials believed that the general stoppage in Liverpool, which followed the arrival of a ship from strike-bound Avonmouth, was further evidence of communist intervention. On 9 June a departmental memo recorded: 'It seems definite that the difficulties which are being created is a Communist Party affair planned at the highest level. (This is from TGWU and Dock Labour Board officials). Stated that Communist Party made plans and were on the job as soon as the *Dromore* difficulty arose [sic].'⁸

The TGWU also insisted that the London strike, which began in the last week of June, was political in character. Bob Mellish, TGWU-sponsored MP for the docklands constituency of Rotherhithe, told journalists that the strike was 'riddled with Communist activity of so serious a nature that the facts should be investigated by MI5'.⁹ John Platts-Mills, who had recently been expelled from the Labour Party amidst unsubstantiated allegations that he was a secret Communist Party member, responded to this statement by referring to Mellish in the House of Commons as the 'special agent for Rotherhithe'.¹⁰

Allegations of communist involvement on the basis of these incidents were taken seriously by the Government. On 4 July the Ministerial Emergencies Committee observed:

the effect and timing of these and other industrial troubles clearly demonstrated the existence of a Communist attempt to cause industrial and financial damage, as part of a campaign to defeat the European Recovery Programme. The dockers were being deluded and exploited by the Communists, and to make this clear would be one step towards bringing the strike to an end.¹¹

⁶PRO: PREM 8/1081, Ministerial Meeting, 23 May 1949.

⁷PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)39, 26 May 1949.

⁸PRO: LAB 10/832, memo by Andrews, 9 June 1949.

⁹*Manchester Guardian*, 4 July 1949.

¹⁰*Daily Worker*, 5 July 1949.

¹¹PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 4 July 1949.

Chuter Ede spelt out this characterisation of the strike when announcing the introduction of Emergency Powers on 8 July, and also emphasised that the communist attempt to disrupt British trade and European recovery was an unacceptable challenge to the State's authority.¹² The strikers were more roundly condemned by Sir Hartley Shawcross, the Attorney General, who said at Liverpool on 9 July: 'These unofficial strikes are an act of economic and political treason to our trade unions, our Socialist movement, and indeed to our country.' When the Opposition pressed Shawcross to clarify this statement in the Commons on 13 July, he argued that he had not meant to imply that the strike was an act of legal treason. In challenging the authority of elected Parliamentary and trade union representatives it was, however, a concerted attack on political democracy.¹³

This belief in communist conspiracies culminated with the publication in December 1949 of a White Paper on the Canadian strikes.¹⁴ The Paper included a foreword from George Isaacs, which stated that evidence existed of 'a cold and deliberate plan' executed by unofficial dock leaders and the communist-dominated Canadian Seamen's Union. Intended to alert the public to the dangers of communist disruption, the timing of the paper's release actually ensured that it received the minimum of publicity. On 16 December, the date of its appearance, Parliament rose until 24 January 1950, and did not in fact reconvene until after the General Election of 23 February. Thus Parliament was denied the opportunity to debate the White Paper, which received only slightly more attention in the press. *The Times* simply provided an uncritical summary of its contents.¹⁵ These were also extensively relayed, in some fourteen or so paragraphs, by the *Manchester Guardian's* labour correspondent. However, this correspondent also pointed out that the Paper had failed to comment on the important row between Lord Ammon and the Government, and the Government's tacit acceptance for two months that the Canadian ships were 'black'. He also criticised its lack of 'official understanding of the genuine loyalties of the dockers which were exploited during the strike'.¹⁶

¹²*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 466, 2596, 8 July 1949.

¹³*Ibid.*, 467, 474-484, 8 July 1949.

¹⁴*Review of the British Dock Strikes, 1949*, (Cmd. 7851, December 1949).

¹⁵*The Times*, 16 December 1949.

¹⁶*Manchester Guardian*, 16 December 1949.

Despite - or perhaps because of - this somewhat unheralded publication, in March 1950 Herbert Morrison attempted to promote public interest in the White Paper, using it to publicise the Communist Party's probable strategy after its disastrous showing in the February General Election. Speaking to the Labour League of Youth at Lewisham, Morrison argued that communists would now switch their efforts from 'the political field to the industrial field'. This would involve an emulation of 'the true and detailed story published as a White Paper just before Christmas, of the international conspiracy which led to last summer's dock strikes here and in other countries'. Incidentally, he added a further, and rather unedifying, sales pitch: 'This amazing record is published by the Stationery Office. It only costs 9d. and anyone who wants to see how the Communist game is played could not do better than order it from a newsagent and read it.'¹⁷

This chapter seeks to reappraise the notion that unofficial dock strikes were a component of the 'Communist game'. Firstly, the three major strikes are re-examined in order to deal more directly with the question of political subversion in the docks. Recapitulating and bringing together points made in the previous three chapters will illuminate the essentially industrial - as opposed to political - characteristics of the three disputes. Secondly, extensive attention is paid to a number of general problems in the industry. These specifically industrial problems were the real causes of the unofficial strikes.

OCTOBER 1945

Arthur Deakin argued that the Revolutionary Communist Party had been instrumental in maintaining the Liverpool strike which sparked the huge Docker's Charter Strike in October 1945. In fact, the RCP was a miniscule force, with a national membership in 1945 of less than 500, many of whom lived in London. More than 20,000 dockers were employed on the Mersey: quite simply, the Trotskyists lacked the members or financial support that were needed to maintain a general stoppage in the Liverpool docks for a number of weeks. Indeed, this largest single industrial dispute of the 1945-51 period had nothing to do with political subversion, but arose from the

¹⁷Full text of Morrison's speech in Lewisham, 24 March 1950, in PRO: CAB 124/4, extended extracts in *The Times*, 25 March 1950.

workforce's dissatisfaction over wages and conditions of work. Dockers had not received a formal increase in their guaranteed minimum daily pay since 1921, and Ernest Bevin was himself aware that this was the cause of the strike.¹⁸

It should also be noted that the TGWU publicly admitted the unsatisfactory nature of the workforce's financial position. On 23 October the TGWU National Docks Delegate Conference observed 'the deep sense of grievance' which members held.¹⁹ Deakin and his colleagues privately recognised the other main characteristic of the huge unofficial strike. Impatient with the leadership's conduct of pay negotiations, large numbers of dockers had temporarily transferred their allegiance to unofficial representatives. Realising that a return would only be secured if sanctioned by these men, the Union leadership reached a highly unusual decision to permit secret - and ultimately successful - negotiations between Liverpool Docks Group officials and unofficial leaders on 'ways and means of terminating the strike'.²⁰

Given Deakin's evident awareness of these problems, some explanation must be offered for his remarks about political subversion. The only actual suggestion of Trotskyist involvement came from Liverpool officers reporting to the Union's Docks Group on 12 October,²¹ but there was never any solid indication of how this involvement had determined the strike's development. In the absence of such evidence, it might reasonably be speculated that the Liverpool officers were offering an explanation for the dispute which did not directly leave themselves open to criticism. There is, after all, no doubt that their response to the original piece-rate and work-books disputes which began on 24 September, had been extremely slow, for negotiations with employers were not opened until 5 October. There is also the possibility that rumours about Trotskyist involvement in the docks might have been started by communists. The British Communist Party, it should be remembered, had greatly embarrassed itself in the early part of 1945 by arguing for a continuation of the war-time Coalition Government, and had attempted to ingratiate itself with the labour

¹⁸PRO: FO 800/491, Bevin to Isaacs, 21 November 1945.

¹⁹MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/23, TGWU Finance and General Purposes' Committee, 25-6 October 1945, report of National Docks Delegate Conference, 23 October 1945.

²⁰DNTGC, 22 October 1945.

²¹DNTGC, 12 October 1945.

movement in August 1945 by pledging its 'whole-hearted support' for the new Government.²² Without access to sources on Communist Party tactics, it is impossible to express any certainties on these matters. However, it is highly likely that the Communist Party's initial support for the Government influenced its strong opposition to the dock strike. It is equally likely that some communist activists in the docks might have seen the situation as representing a dual opportunity: they could undermine support for the strike and attack their hated Trotskyist rivals, the Revolutionary Communists, by linking the two together. This is speculation, but unless the non-communist Liverpool TGWU officers merely invented the story to protect themselves from criticism, and with the Government and the Union already greatly embarrassed by the strike, only the Communist Party really stood to gain from rumours of political subversion. Did Arthur Deakin himself unconsciously participate in a communist conspiracy on this occasion, by branding the strike as a Trotskyist ramp?

JUNE 1948

Just as the 1945 strike was essentially a traditional industrial struggle for improved pay and conditions, so the 'political' nature of the 1948 'Zinc Oxide' strike in London was similarly overblown. In private the Government was perfectly aware of the fact that, whatever Deakin said, Scotland Yard believed there to be no evidence linking the strike with political subversion.²³ Nevertheless, in his broadcast of 28 June, Attlee studiously ignored the specifically industrial causes of the strike, and asserted that it had been organised by a small core of agitators. To recap briefly, the strike began with a disputed piece-rate for an unusual cargo - 100 tons of zinc oxide - in Regent's Canal Dock. The employer offered 3s4d per ton, but the gang of eleven men wanted 5s per ton. The TGWU negotiating official, S. Platt, drew the wrath of his members for sanctioning the employer's rate by telephone without actually seeing the cargo himself. In refusing to discharge the cargo at this lower rate, the men failed to fulfil their obligations under the Dock Labour Scheme, and were duly suspended by the London Dock Labour Board without pay for seven days, and their rights to attendance money and guaranteed make-up

²²Communist Party, *World News and Views*, 4 August 1945.

²³Above, pp.116-17.

withdrawn for thirteen weeks. This second penalty was reduced to two weeks after an appeal.

An unofficial pamphlet on the piece-rate dispute and the consequent penalties, stated that Platt, by having 'agreed to a rate before seeing the job and without consulting the men', had committed an 'outrage'.²⁴ This criticism of Platt suggested that the Union had yet to regain the confidence of its members which had so obviously been lost in October 1945. The difficulty facing the TGWU was also evident on 18 June, when it attempted to restore order with an official meeting in Victoria Park. This ended in farce as the small crowd of 300 walked off as a body when the London Docks Group officials arrived.²⁵

Whilst maintaining that the strike was a political conspiracy, Deakin sensibly acknowledged that his members had been greatly antagonised by the length of the men's original thirteen week punishment. He threw the Union's weight behind a demand that the maximum period of disenfranchisement to the benefits of the Scheme be drastically cut, and in November 1948 the employers' representatives on the National Dock Labour Board agreed to reduce this to four weeks.²⁶ This admission is further evidence that the 1948 strike, as with the 1945 episode, was the result of two things: an industrial dispute between employers and workers, and the perception which many dockers held - partly for historical reasons - that they were inadequately represented in these disputes by their union officials.

THE 1949 STRIKES

In contrast to 1945 and even 1948, in 1949 charges of political subversion were more explicit, and made with far greater persistence and certainty. Chapter Five suggested that it was these charges that have earned the Canadian strikes their relatively high profile in the historiography of the 1945 Government, with various historians characterising the dispute as an early domestic episode in the Cold War.²⁷ As Chapter Three noted, it is paradoxical that historians have devoted far less attention to the much

²⁴PRO: BK 2/72, Port Workers' Strike Committee, *The Men's Own Case*.

²⁵*The Times*, 19 June 1948.

²⁶Chapter 4, p.116.

²⁷Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power*, pp. 375-8; Peter Weiler, *British Labour and the Cold War*, pp. 230-69.

larger 1945 strike. Yet the very persistent attention which historians have given to the Government's allegations, without actually refuting them, does demand that far more attention be given to this aspect of the 1949 affair than the 1945 and 1948 strikes.

In public Cabinet Ministers and Trade Union leaders expressed the strong belief that the Canadian strikes were a communist conspiracy, and these certainties were summarised in the White Paper of December 1949. Yet having read a draft of this paper, and acting upon the advice of a junior colleague, the Solicitor at the Ministry of Labour, A.F. Harrison, gave a stern warning to the Ministry's Chief Industrial Commissioner, Sir Robert Gould. Harrison said that opinions expressed in its foreword - about the Canadian Seamen's Union and the character of the stoppage - were both defamatory and legally dubious.²⁸ The Ministry of Labour duly sought advice from Sir Hartley Shawcross. He believed that the 'communist conspiracy' charge was unlikely to stand up in court if the dockers' unofficial leaders or the CSU decided to sue the Government for libel, and counselled that the Government would only evade this inevitable embarrassment by publishing the report under the 1840 Parliamentary Papers Act as a White Paper. By appearing as a White Paper, the report's contents - highly contentious as they were - received important and absolute legal immunity.²⁹ This legal protection was of immense importance, enabling the Government to deflect public attention from the serious private reservations which it held, with regard to both the character of the British stoppages and the merits of the Canadian dispute. These private reservations greatly undermined the validity of its public position that the strikes were a 'communist conspiracy'.

THE CANADIAN STOPPAGES: STRIKES OR LOCK-OUTS?

To recall events discussed in Chapter Five, the Canadian conflict essentially arose from the virulent anti-communism of the American Federation of Labour, which was engaged in displacing the Communist-led Canadian Seamen's Union with its own affiliate, the Seafarers' International Union, as the chief organiser of Canadian East Coast seamen. At the first formal Ministerial discussion of the Canadian-related troubles, chaired by Attlee

²⁸PRO: LAB 16/97, Harrison to Gould, 31 October 1949.

²⁹Ibid., Shawcross to Harrison, 29 November 1949.

on 23 May, George Isaacs blamed much of the trouble at Avonmouth on the CSU's communist President, Harry Davis. Davis had persuaded local dockers not to unload a Canadian ship, the *Montreal City*, which was crewed by members of the SIU. However, Isaacs also drew attention to the decision taken by the Avonmouth employers on 17 May, which was that no fresh labour would be requisitioned until the *Montreal City* was manned. Thus, he added, in voting to go on strike, the Avonmouth dockers had 'been influenced by the virtual "lock-out" declared by the employers'.³⁰

Isaacs's assessment, that the Avonmouth stoppage was an industrial conflict between workers and employers, was shared by Arthur Bird, National Secretary of the TGWU Docks Group. Having publicly advised his members to disregard the 'row between two [North American] unions' and continue working on all vessels,³¹ Bird was secretly furious with the Avonmouth employers for attempting to coerce his members into working the *Montreal City*. He told the employers that they had locked his members out, and - vainly, as it turned out - demanded a reversal of their position.³²

Further anxiety amongst Labour leaders was expressed in the Emergencies Committee on 25 May, which noted that dockers had refused to work on the *Montreal City* and another Canadian vessel, the *Gulfside*, because they believed that the SIU crews of these ships were blacklegs. Ministers evidently sympathised with this belief: 'They [the dockers] had been confirmed in this attitude by the action of Canadian shipowners in flying over substitute crews consisting of members of the SIU to man vessels whose CSU crews had struck.' The view was also put that, with the workforce willing to work all vessels except the Canadian ones, 'it was the action of the two groups of employers which had exacerbated the situation and led to the present stoppage. If that action could be reversed, the port as a whole could be re-opened and negotiations about the *Montreal City* and the *Gulfside* could go on as a separate and minor issue in a much better atmosphere.'³³

The meeting ultimately rejected this course of action, because in order to preserve the Dock Labour Scheme's credibility, the unofficial strike had to be defeated. On 26 May the committee's chairman, Chuter Ede,

³⁰PRO: PREM 8/1081, Ministerial meeting to discuss strike over Canadian ships, 23 May 1949.

³¹PRO: LAB 10/783, clipping from *Western Daily Press*, 7 May 1949.

³²PRO: LAB 10/833, Whitlock memo to Barnes, 25 May 1949.

³³PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 25 May 1949.

secured the deployment of service labour at Avonmouth.³⁴ Ede appears to have genuinely believed that the Canadian strike was a communist conspiracy, and told Cabinet colleagues that British dockers should be warned about the dangers of this 'communist exploitation'.³⁵ He was greatly taken aback, therefore, when Arthur Deakin - of all people - quashed both the idea that the dispute was a straightforward communist plot, and the notion that British dockers would call off their action if the facts of the Canadian controversy were put before them. Deakin discussed the situation with Isaacs and Ede on 30 May. Reporting the meeting to his Emergencies Committee colleagues, the Home Secretary said that Deakin, 'did not favour the idea of bringing representatives of the International Seamen's Union [ie. the Seafarers' International Union] to this country to explain the true facts of the seamen's strike to the dockers here. He was not altogether convinced (and this was the first time that the Home Secretary had heard such doubts suggested) that the case of the International Seamen's Union was entirely sound.' This greatly irritated Ede, who added - perhaps unnecessarily - that Deakin had lost control of his members and did not expect them to listen to anything he said on the subject. As a former schoolmaster Ede had little industrial experience of the labour movement, but the old trade unionist Isaacs again reminded his colleagues of the situation's delicacy. The SIU had been engaged by the Canadian shipowners during a legal strike by the CSU: 'That was why the SIU were regarded by the CSU and by British dockers as blacklegs and why the Canadian Trades Union Congress [ie. the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress], although threatening to disaffiliate the CSU, had expressed almost equally strong disapproval of the employers and the SIU.'³⁶ This obviously contradicted the position which the Government, and indeed the TGWU, took in public, and it should be re-emphasised that criticism of the SIU, the Canadian shipowners and British port employers, did not find its way into the White Paper.

The official report also ignored evidence which contradicted the Government's insistence that communists had spread the trouble to Liverpool. Ministry of Labour information on communist involvement in Liverpool came from local Dock Board and TGWU officials, by way of its

³⁴PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 26 May 1949.

³⁵PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)39, 26 May 1949.

³⁶PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 30 May 1949.

Regional Industrial Relations Officer, A.S. Andrews. Andrews believed that communists had plotted the action. But even he did not accept their story in detail: 'TGWU officials allege that the plotting takes place in Bessie Braddock's office at Liverpool, This is perhaps a libellous statement.'³⁷ From the same officials who had apparently cooked up the Trotskyist conspiracy in 1945, this was more than libellous. It was, in fact, outwith the realms of common sense, for no less likely communist conspirator against the TGWU and the Labour Government could have been suggested than Braddock. This was the same arch right-wing Labour MP who later wrote of Aneurin Bevan: 'He made it fashionable to be a dissident. He weakened the National Executive to a point where it could no longer deal effectively with infiltrating Trotskyists and Communists.'³⁸ In questioning this particular TGWU allegation, Andrews drew attention to the general unreliability of his Union sources. Nevertheless, he continued to accept their broad contention that the strike was a communist plot.

The Government was, however, given an alternative perspective on events by one of its own members, Harold Wilson, the President of the Board of Trade and a Liverpool constituency MP. Having met some of his constituents who were on strike, Wilson told Isaacs on 13 June that the strike was not communist in origin, and only a 'very small minority' of the strike committee were communists. His constituents claimed that the employers had deliberately forced a confrontation by directing labour to a ship, the *Dromore*, which had sailed from Avonmouth: 'The strike was not based on any sympathy with, or alleged solidarity with Canadian strikers, but was based on what they regarded as a point of Union principle in connection with the working of a ship they regarded as "black" which had come from a strike-affected port.'³⁹

This assessment, that the strikers were merely observing a time-honoured trade union principle, confirmed Isaacs's private conviction - shared with TGWU leaders - that the strikes primarily revealed industrial rather than political concerns. At a meeting chaired by Attlee on 10 June, Chuter Ede had again criticised Arthur Deakin: 'It almost appeared that Mr. Deakin was keeping from the dockers the real issues in the case, and also attempting to obscure the fact that the strike, though not inspired by the

³⁷PRO: LAB 10/832, memo by Andrews, 9 June 1949.

³⁸Jack and Bessie Braddock, *The Braddocks*, p. 203.

³⁹PRO: LAB 10/832, Wilson to Isaacs, 13 June 1949.

communists, was being vigorously exploited by them.' Isaacs, on the other hand, strongly supported Deakin's uncharacteristic refusal to attack unofficial action. He argued that far from bringing the stoppages in Avonmouth and Liverpool to an end:

an attempt to expose the fundamental issues might lead to a total stoppage of work in all the docks in the country. The Canadian employers, when the CSU first struck, had been only too quick in calling in the SIU, which was affiliated to the AFL. Any full statement must include the fact that the SIU had intervened against the CSU, and it was noteworthy that the CTLC [Canadian Trades and Labour Congress] had expressed almost equal disapproval of the Canadian employers and the SIU. The dockers in the UK would only be confirmed in their belief that members of the SIU manning Canadian ships were blacklegs. This was a fundamental Trade Union point and to stress it would only do harm.⁴⁰

Faced with an insistence from Attlee that he broadcast in any case on the following day, 11 June, Isaacs acted upon his understanding that an exposition of the dispute's true facts would prolong the strike. Therefore, he suppressed his misgivings about the confrontational tactics of both the Canadian and British employers, and simply reiterated the line that the strike was a communist plot to embarrass the Government and the TGWU, and to hamper trade and economic recovery. In referring to Canadian events, he stated only that the communist-dominated CSU had been disaffiliated by its parent body, the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress. No mention was made of either the CTLC's attitude towards the SIU, or the SIU's intervention against the CSU in the latter's argument with Canadian East Coast shipowners.⁴¹ Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy have bestowed great credit on Isaacs's broadcast, pointing out, 'Evidently he convinced the strikers.'⁴² Indeed he convinced the men, for the strikes at Avonmouth and Liverpool ended almost immediately, but it is unlikely that he convinced himself. The Government had initially planned the broadcast on 26 May to tell the dockers the plain truth about the Canadian strike, and persuade them that their own strike action was dangerous and illegitimate. In fact, the Government realised that the strike would only be brought to an end if its true origins were obscured rather than clarified.

⁴⁰PRO: CAB 130/46, Ministerial meeting on strike, 10 June 1949.

⁴¹PRO: LAB 43/150, copy of full text of Isaacs's broadcast, 11 June 1949.

⁴²Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy, *States of Emergency*, p. 202.

When the Canadian trouble spread to London, the Government's characterisation of developments was equally misleading. To further recall events which were discussed in Chapter Five, trouble began in earnest on 27 June after the London port employers echoed the actions of their Avonmouth counterparts in announcing that no new labour would be engaged until two disputed Canadian ships - the *Argomont* in the Surrey Docks and the *Beaverbrae* in the Royal Docks - were manned and working. The employers knew these vessels were a potential source of trouble, and had avoided directing workers to them since their arrival in London at the beginning of April. The dockers' unofficial leadership cited the employers' action, which was supported by the London Dock Labour Board on 29 June, as a lock-out, and the sole cause of the stoppage. The 'Central Lock-out Committee' dismissed charges of political motivation: 'it is inevitable that someone sooner or later will discover that the refusal of the workers to **blackleg** or go hungry through low wages and high prices, are really Communist plots.'⁴³

The main body of dockers apparently supported the committee's conviction that the employers had effected a lock-out. An attempt by Bob Mellish, the Labour MP for Rotherhithe, to convince dockers that they had been tricked by communists into going on strike, was a clear failure. Following a public meeting which Mellish organised in Poplar on 2 July, a local Ministry of Labour official reported to the Assistant Secretary, Diack, that: 'The idea of a "red plot" does not make much impression on dockers.'⁴⁴

There was little wonder in this. On 7 July Cabinet heard that the police had 'little evidence about the activities of the Communists in fomenting the various dock strikes, though strikers were being advised by persons with legal experience who had Communist sympathies'.⁴⁵ Legal advice from Communist sympathisers certainly did not impute a conspiracy to undermine economic recovery. The Government's public line was also dismissed by its own law officers. On 6 July Sir Hartley Shawcross discussed the dispute's character with the Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Theobald Matthew, the Solicitor General, Frank Soskice MP, and A.F. Harrison from the Solicitor's Department at the Ministry of Labour. The

⁴³PRO: LAB 16/201, Central Lock-out Committee, *To All Portworkers*, undated but probably printed and distributed at the beginning of July 1949. The emphasis is original.

⁴⁴PRO: LAB 10/904, Hull to Diack, 5 July 1949.

⁴⁵PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)44, 7 July 1949.

four men sympathetically considered the view of the unofficial dockers' committee, that the stoppage was a lock-out on the part of the employers. Shawcross felt: 'that the plain object of the employers generally in not taking on labour was to compel the men to work the Canadian ships and they were doing this to aid the employers at the Canadian ships to get the men back to work on these ships.' As Shawcross was, in the course of the following week, to publicly describe the unofficial strike as 'economic and political treason' on two separate occasions, this was a remarkable private admission. Significantly, also, it was an opinion shared by Sir Theobald Matthew.⁴⁶ When spelling out an analysis of the dispute in the 7 July Cabinet, Shawcross emphasised the Director of Public Prosecutions's feelings on the matter. Given the immense gulf between Shawcross's private and public views, these Cabinet minutes merit extensive quotation:

The Attorney General said that, on facts supplied to him by the police, he and the Director of Public Prosecutions inclined to the view that in the main it was a lock-out by the employers. The employers had tacitly accepted for some weeks the refusal of the dockers to unload two Canadian ships, on which there was a dispute between the ship-owners and the crew, but on 27 June they had indicated that men would not be engaged for work on other ships until work began on the unloading of the Canadian ships. On such facts as he had been given, he considered that a lock-out must be held to exist, even in respect of dockers who had been engaged for ships coming to the port after the dispute had begun.⁴⁷

George Isaacs qualified these remarks by reminding colleagues of the Dock Labour Scheme's continuity rule, under which dockers who had declined to finish work on ships for which they had been engaged, definitely were on strike. Nevertheless, Shawcross's views on the dispute's character, expressed with the full authority of the Director of Public Prosecutions and complemented by police evidence that communist involvement was negligible, possibly contributed to the uneasiness felt by some Ministers about the introduction of Emergency Powers.⁴⁸ Shawcross was personally in favour of using Emergency Powers, but the dissenting Ministers may well have agreed with him when he told Isaacs after this Cabinet meeting that the stoppage was, 'both a strike in relation to some ships and a lock-out

⁴⁶PRO: LAB 10/904, Harrison's note of meeting involving himself, the Attorney General, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Solicitor General, 6 July 1949.

⁴⁷PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)44, 7 July 1949.

⁴⁸Ibid.

in relation to others. ... The real point is, I think, that the men seem now anxious to work all ships other than the two Canadian ones.⁴⁹

Shawcross repeated this judgement on 8 July, confirming in Cabinet that the dispute represented a strike in the case of some ships, and a lock-out in the case of others: 'It is therefore, not possible in law to give unqualified support to the view that the present stoppage is a strike.'⁵⁰ That afternoon, in the House of Commons, Chuter Ede announced the Government's intention to proclaim a State of Emergency under the 1920 regulations. In so doing he contradicted the views of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Attorney General, and ignored police evidence by unashamedly misrepresenting the character of the dispute:

The only reason why we are having to deal with the trouble in this country is that the Communists see in it the chance of fomenting unrest, injuring our trade, and so hampering our recovery and with it the whole process of Marshall Aid on which the recovery of Europe depends. The issue with which we are faced is not one of a legitimate industrial dispute. We are faced with a challenge to the authority of the state and it must be met.⁵¹

This greatly distorted the Government's own view of events. By the admission of Shawcross, the dispute's central feature was not communist intervention, the Marshall Plan or political subversion, but 'a lock-out by the employers'; for those refusing to work, all that mattered was their unwillingness to unload the two Canadian ships which were subject to an industrial dispute. Once committed to the State of Emergency, however, the Government's public position on the character of the dispute grew even more uncompromising. On Wednesday 13 July, on the morning of the Parliamentary debate on Emergency Powers, Attlee's Principal Private Secretary, Osmond, told him that the Opposition intended to press the Government to clarify whether the dispute was, in legal terms, a strike or a lock-out. Osmond advised that it 'would be very damaging' if the Government admitted that it was at least partly a lock-out, and suggested two alternative courses of action: Ministers could either disregard Shawcross's advice and emphasise that the stoppage was a strike, given that under the Dock Labour Scheme the workforce was obliged to accept any available work; or Eden could be approached before the debate, and

⁴⁹PRO: LAB 10/904, Shawcross to Isaacs, 7 July 1949.

⁵⁰PRO: CAB 129/CP(49)148, 8 July 1949.

⁵¹*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.466, 2596, 8 July.

confidentially asked to defer his awkward question.⁵² It is possible that Eden's co-operation was duly obtained, for he concentrated instead - ironically, given the tension between Isaacs and Ede on this question - on the Government's supposed failure to give the men sufficient information on the dispute's Canadian origins, and communism's alleged exploitation of the situation.⁵³

Perhaps in response to Eden's likely co-operation in not pressing the matter, but also in order to bolster its defence of the Dock Labour Scheme, the Government provided a firmer public definition of the dispute that evening. In a Ministerial broadcast, Isaacs firmly set Shawcross's views aside and stiffly informed dockers that their stoppage was a strike, and definitely not a lock-out. He said: 'Your so-called unofficial strike leaders [the men were, in fact, led by the 'Central Lock-out Committee'] tried to change the nature of this dispute. To call it a lock-out instead of a strike is just playing with words. You know you walked off the job and said you would return only on the condition that you would not work certain ships.'⁵⁴ As an experienced trade unionist, Isaacs ought to have known that calling a dispute a lock-out rather than a strike was much more than merely 'playing with words'; and whilst insisting that under the continuity rule many dockers were on strike, he had not himself dissented from Shawcross's position that the employers were attempting to force many others on to ships that were subject to a trade dispute. The basic injustice that dock workers perceived in this situation was spelt out to journalists by Albert Timothy, the Lock-out Committee's chairman, on 11 July after an unofficial mass meeting in Victoria Park had voted to continue the boycott of the Canadian ships. Timothy's remarks were apparently also addressed to Labour leaders without trade union experience, such as Ede and Shawcross, who had failed to recognise - at least in public, and in Ede's case even in private - the dispute's industrial dimensions:

They will never understand the things that are causing us to do what we are doing to-day. They will never know the reason, because they will never understand the position of a good trade unionist down where we live. We will never go and scab on another man, or blackleg on another man. If the Government want to take gloves off, if they want to come out and fight

⁵²PRO: PREM 8/1081, Osmond to Attlee, 13 July 1949.

⁵³*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.467, 444-452, 13 July.

⁵⁴PRO: LAB 10/904, text of Ministerial Broadcast, 13 July 1949.

against anybody, then I say that the Emergency Powers Act should be used against the employers and not against us.⁵⁵

These remarks bore a pointed similarity to those offered by Isaacs himself, during the Ministerial discussion of 10 June, when he had explained that the reluctance of the Avonmouth men to work a disputed Canadian ship was a 'fundamental Trade Union point'.⁵⁶ Isaacs surely understood that London dockers were equally determined to avoid the 'black' or 'scab' Canadian vessels; he also knew, from police evidence and advice from his own Ministry's legal department, that the strike was not a communist conspiracy. Nevertheless, like the rest of his Government colleagues, he continued to mislead the public by denying that employers had acted in an inflammatory manner, and by erroneously insisting that the dispute was a politically-motivated strike.

GENERAL POST-WAR PROBLEMS

Each of the three large unofficial strikes revealed a serious difference of opinion between the TGWU and sections of its dock membership on a specifically *industrial* issue: in 1945 it was pay and conditions; in 1948 the alleged victimisation of eleven workers; and in 1949 the question of intervening in a trade dispute between Canadian seamen and Canadian employers. The Government and Trade Union leaders were particularly frustrated by the 1948 and 1949 strikes: Labour's political and industrial leaders were broadly bound by an unwillingness to concede that industrial tension - a historical feature of the docks - had survived the introduction of the 1947 Dock Labour Scheme. The first chapter of this thesis observed that the Government enjoyed invaluable support from the Trade Union movement in pursuit of economic recovery; and the second chapter remarked that the Dock Labour Scheme - with its provision of a regular workforce in a strategically vital industry - was seen by the Government as instrumental to Britain's export-driven recovery, with the TGWU's conception and administration of the Scheme cited as a particular example of the Trade Union co-operation discussed in Chapter One. Reliant on the Scheme and the TGWU, the Government duly sought to defend them both

⁵⁵*Manchester Guardian*, 12 July 1949.

⁵⁶PRO: CAB 130/46, Ministerial meeting on strike, 10 June 1949.

from the attacks which it perceived unofficial dock strikes to represent. During the three strikes discussed in chapters three, four and five, the Government invariably sought a course of action that would allow the Union to reassert its authority amongst its dock members.⁵⁷ Moreover, whilst troops were brought in to maintain short-term supplies of essential food and raw materials, in breaking unofficial strikes they were also deployed in the interests of longer-term stability in the docks. In undermining the unofficial movement, troop operations were effectively - and on at least one occasion, in 1949 at Avonmouth, explicitly - used to defend the authority of the Scheme, and thereby the reputation of the TGWU.⁵⁸

Defending the Union and the Scheme involved attacking unofficial strikes as politically-motivated. By exploiting a 'red plot' line during the strikes, in 1948 and 1949 the Government successfully obscured problems which certainly existed in the docks, most centrally the Union's inability to overcome its traditional difficulty in commanding the support of its dock members. The unofficial strikes duly illuminated weaknesses - within the Scheme and the Union - which the Government was anxious to obscure because of its economic priorities, and it was probably for these reasons that Labour's political and industrial leaders adopted such a misleading public position on the strikes. It is to these problems in the docks which the discussion now turns.

WELFARE AMENITIES

Britain's straitened circumstances had stiffened the Labour Government's determination to introduce the Dock Labour Scheme in 1947. However, the perilous economic position also ensured that the Scheme was not accompanied by much-needed improvements to the quality and range of welfare conditions in the docks. The Government was worried by the likely implications of this at the highest level. On 5 August 1948 George Isaacs informed the National Dock Labour Board of Attlee's concern that unsatisfactory welfare conditions had been a contributory factor in the

⁵⁷PRO: CAB 128/CM(45)41, 15 October 1945; PRO: CAB 134/175 EC, 21 June 1948; PRO: PREM 8/1081, Ministerial meeting to discuss strike over Canadian ships, 23 May 1949.

⁵⁸PRO: CAB 134/176, EC, 30 May 1949.

recent strike in London. For this reason, Isaacs invited the Board to undertake an inquiry into the state of existing conditions in all ports, and to offer relevant recommendations for their improvement.⁵⁹ Material was compiled by local dock boards during the winter of 1948-49, and the National Board submitted its findings and recommendations to the Ministry of Labour on 25 February 1949.⁶⁰

The report observed that existing welfare provisions were greatly stretched by the significant social changes which had recently taken place in the docks. There had been an increased tendency, during and since the war, for the workforce to live outwith the immediate vicinity of the docks, which meant greater demand for catering and washing facilities. Evidently far fewer men could eat their mid-day meal at home, which was in any case a problem further complicated by rationing; and dockers from Glasgow, on the Tyne and in Liverpool had commented on the problems associated with travelling home in dirty clothes on public transport. The report added that the process of social change, greatly accelerated by the Scheme, had involved greatly improved living standards and expectations amongst dock workers; and that this was reflected in more widespread demands for better canteens, wash-places and toilets. Indeed, on the basis that every local board had commented on the inadequacy of their sanitary arrangements, the Board believed that the need for improved toilets was especially urgent. Dock areas were exempt from the sanitary regulations of existing factory and public health legislation, and hence the quality of provision was, to say the least, mixed. The typical toilet appears to have been a pale latrine which discharged directly into the dock, canal or river, was housed in an iron or wooden shanty without protection from the elements, and afforded no privacy to the user. 'It is not surprising', noted the report, 'that the men avoid the lavatories wherever possible and have a real fear of infection.' Where decent toilets had been provided, the Board recorded no evidence of serious misuse or vandalism, and felt that the vast majority of dockers would respond favourably if improved toilets, along with updated catering and washing facilities, were instituted on a national basis.⁶¹

⁵⁹PRO: BK 2/149, meeting between Isaacs and National Dock Labour Board, 5 August 1948; Isaacs to Lord Ammon, 6 August 1948.

⁶⁰PRO: BK 2/149, Thomas to Isaacs, 25 February 1949.

⁶¹PRO: CAB 124/602, NDLB report, 'Docks Amenities', March 1949.

Having read the report, Isaacs told Morrison - who as Lord President was to chair ministerial discussions on the subject - that it revealed 'a state of affairs which demands urgent action'.⁶² When the Lord President's committee discussed the report on 1 April, Isaacs reminded colleagues that it had been commissioned by Attlee, who was keen that the recommendations on toilets, canteens and washrooms be implemented at the earliest possible date. However, despite Attlee's support, the report was rejected by the committee on the basis that it had neglected to identify the body responsible for effecting improvements, which, moreover, had not even been costed. Isaacs attempted to mollify the committee by pointing out that all financial costs would probably be borne by port users, but this was not strong enough an assurance for Cripps. He explicitly ruled out Treasury involvement, either in planning or financing the improvements, and Isaacs was left to establish an inter-departmental Working Party - without Treasury representation - to cost the proposals and identify the body responsible for implementing and financing them.⁶³

The Committee's Working Party reported back on 28 October 1949. The intervening period had witnessed the Canadian-related strikes and more pertinently, as it turned out, a serious financial crisis and the consequent devaluation of sterling on 18 September. The Working Party re-emphasised that radically improved facilities were required in most dock areas, and confirmed Isaacs's earlier suggestion that responsibility for improving the dock amenities rested with port users. However, the recommended measures would cost around £1,000,000 over three years, and Isaacs argued that, given the 'present economic pressure', it would be unfeasible to press for their immediate implementation. His conclusion, that on economic grounds the measures would have to be shelved, was supported by the Minister of Transport, Alfred Barnes, and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Glenvill Hall. The Committee meekly concurred with this assessment.⁶⁴

This decision was further notice of the Government's preoccupation with economic recovery. Yet the failure to press the port users or the Treasury to finance the improvements rested uneasily with the Government's often asserted view that economic recovery required an

⁶²PRO: CAB 124/602, Isaacs to Morrison, 25 March 1949.

⁶³PRO: CAB 132, LP(49)8, 1 April 1949.

⁶⁴PRO: CAB 132, LP(49)18, 28 October 1949.

efficient performance from the docks industry. Attlee and Isaacs had both expressed concern that such a performance was being hampered by poor dock amenities, with Isaacs describing remedial action as a matter of urgency. As a proportion of public expenditure, which in 1949 exceeded £2,000 million,⁶⁵ the required sum of £1 million represented a modest investment for a potentially high return. It was hardly surprising, then, that the National Dock Labour Board was immensely frustrated when informed of the Government's decision in January 1950. Arthur Bird, the TGWU Docks Group leader, was particularly concerned, telling his NDLB colleagues that the postponement would have 'serious repercussions throughout the country'.⁶⁶ Isaacs was informed by the Board that the indefinite postponement of reform fitted uneasily with earlier Government assertions about the urgency of improving welfare amenities, and asked to review the situation.⁶⁷ Isaacs agreed to meet the Board, but did so only in order to rule out a review of the October decision, and to confirm that no work involving 'substantial' capital outlay would be sanctioned.⁶⁸

The debate about the supposed relationship between tense industrial relations and poor amenities, did not end with the Government's refusal to finance improvements to the latter in January 1950. Four months later, after another unofficial dock strike in London, Isaacs appointed an official Inquiry into unofficial stoppages in the Port. This later strike, the establishment of the Inquiry and the consequent pressure which was exerted upon the Government's relationship with the TGWU, are all discussed in detail in the final chapter of this thesis. At this stage it is enough to note that the Inquiry - which was chaired by Sir Frederick Leggett, the former Chief Industrial Commissioner at the Ministry of Labour - paid close attention to welfare amenities. On 28 July 1950 the Lord President's Committee received an interim report from Leggett. This stated that substandard provision of canteens, toilets, washing facilities and first-aid materials had significantly contributed to industrial unrest.⁶⁹ Leggett's initial finding was confirmed in his final report, which appeared as a Command Paper in May 1951. He noted that welfare standards throughout

⁶⁵Alec Cairncross, *Years of Recovery*, p. 33.

⁶⁶PRO: BK 2/255, NDLB, 10 January 1950.

⁶⁷PRO: BK 2/150, Thomas to Isaacs, 13 January 1950.

⁶⁸PRO: BK 2/150, Isaacs to Ammon, 30 January 1950.

⁶⁹PRO: CAB 132, LP(50)14, 28 July 1950.

the nation's docks were significantly lower than the rest of modern industry. In London these facilities were particularly poor, and had appreciably augmented 'the sourness of industrial relations in the port'. Leggett also criticised the Government for failing to act on the NDLB survey which it had commissioned. This had aroused the workforce's interest in the issue, causing fresh impatience and antagonism when the anticipated improvements had been abandoned.⁷⁰

These findings on the relationship between amenities and strikes induced the scorn of Transport Ministry officials. In the wake of Leggett's interim report in July 1950, their position was summarised for Herbert Morrison by his Principal Private Secretary, E.M. Nicholson. Mischievously quoting Leggett's observation that the workforce admired the Scheme, Nicholson demonstrated his complete agreement with the MoT officials:

[The Leggett Committee] has lost no time in pulling out the usual recipe for pacifying the dockers by overwhelming them with canteen services, sanitary conveniences, washing facilities and first-aid. There is no doubt that by any ordinary standards the dockers are extremely badly provided for in these ways. On the other hand no evidence is produced ... for the implied argument that if enough lavatories are suddenly provided the men will immediately regard the Dock Labour Board as a fairy godmother and 'increase their undoubted loyalty to the scheme' which they demonstrate by going on strike in defiance of it every few weeks.⁷¹

Nicholson's doubts about the workforce's evaluation of the Scheme were altogether misplaced, and very few dockers advocated a return to pre-war casual conditions. Admittedly unofficial leaders had criticised the introduction of the 1947 Scheme, arguing for a more wide-ranging reform of the industry based on the nationalisation of ports, docks, harbours and canals.⁷² Nevertheless, they strongly supported the improved job and economic security which the Scheme had brought, with the London strike committee of June 1948 recording, 'it is a good scheme and the majority of Port Workers welcome it'.⁷³

⁷⁰*Unofficial Stoppages in the London Docks. Report of a Committee of Inquiry*, (Cmd. 8236, May 1951), p.30.

⁷¹PRO: CAB 124/602, Nicholson to Morrison, 27 July 1950.

⁷²MRC/MSS.15B/40, National Portworkers' Defence Committee, *The Enquiry and You!* (May 1947).

⁷³PRO: BK 2/72, London Port Workers' Strike Committee, *Reflections on the Strike*, July 1948.

However, as the NDLB report on amenities had demonstrated, in accepting the Scheme's financial benefits, the workforce's expectations had been greatly enhanced. Where out-dated welfare provisions failed to live up to these expectations, dissatisfaction was indeed likely. The Government and the TGWU gave much publicity to the notion that the Scheme had been a massive breakthrough: this notion of progress was not necessarily shared by the dockers who had to travel home in wet and filthy clothing and use some of the most insanitary toilets in British industry. In fact, the Government continued to accept that the quality of amenities had contributed to the unrest in the docks. In May 1951 the Lord President's Committee endorsed a paper to this effect by the new Minister of Labour, Alfred Robens,⁷⁴ but there was still no commitment to financing the improvements which were deemed necessary.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SCHEME?

The survival of squalid amenities should not, however, be seen as an isolated difficulty, but rather in terms of the 1947 Scheme's general failure to dispense with the industry's historical problems. The central feature of this history had been casual employment, and - as chapter two indicated - neither Bevin's war-time initiatives nor the 1947 Scheme itself had eradicated this. The survival of the free call on a twice-daily basis, which ensured that a substantial amount of labour was recruited casually, caused the Leggett Inquiry to observe that the Scheme had instituted, 'little change from the habits and practices of casual employment'.⁷⁵ A subsequent official inquiry into the Scheme's operation, appointed in 1955 by the Conservative Minister of Labour, Sir Walter Monckton, and chaired by Mr. Justice Devlin, emphasised that the free call was contrary to the spirit of the Scheme. It allowed employers - through their foremen - to exercise favouritism; it also promoted an undignified and sometimes physical competitive scramble amongst the workforce for the more attractive and lucrative jobs. Devlin also drew attention to the problems facing dockers who were not employed in the morning, and who were obliged to attend the afternoon call five hours later: this required a long wait or double travel expenses for what often turned out to be a fruitless

⁷⁴PRO: CAB 132, LP(51)11, 11 May 1951.

⁷⁵Cmd. 8236, p.12.

return. The report noted that casual recruitment and the problems associated with the two daily free calls had aroused considerable discontent amongst the workforce.⁷⁶ There is evidence to corroborate each of Devlin's points on this matter. On the eve of the Scheme's introduction in May 1947, the London unofficial movement had demanded that there be a single daily call, held each morning.⁷⁷ On the wider consequences of casual recruitment, it should also be noted that work was paid largely by the piece, and the rate generally reflected a cargo's market value rather than the physical effort involved in shifting it. This naturally bred a great deal of resentment. In London's Royal Docks there was always immense competition to handle cargoes of imported meat. Although tough work, it paid much better than many other cargoes of comparable difficulty, such as cement. Of those who congregated at the call stands to work on the meat, foremen saw a natural advantage in recruiting the younger and fitter men - in one docker's words, 'all the ruckers' - who were duly regarded with jealousy by older and less fit men.⁷⁸ The word 'ruckers', it might be added, conveys something of the physical struggle for the foreman's attention which Devlin recognised as characterising the free call.

In addition to citing evidence that the free call was an important source of underlying tension, the Leggett Inquiry reported that the twice-daily calls significantly contributed to the manner in which strikes started. In gathering men together, the calls gave men who had a grievance and were spoiling for a strike a captive audience, and this occasionally allowed 'a few men to sway the rest'.⁷⁹ During the Canadian dispute Bevin made this very point to Chuter Ede, in successfully pressing for a temporary suspension of the call stands in London's Royal Docks: 'It causes such a congestion and works up mass psychology. It also enables our opponents to carry out their tasks and keep the men out.'⁸⁰

The longevity of the casual tradition was a source of trouble in another way, however. Chapter Two acknowledged the broad historical

⁷⁶*Port Transport Industry. Report of a Committee of Inquiry*, (Cmd. 9813, 1956), p.29.

⁷⁷MRC/MSS.15B/40, National Portworkers' Defence Committee, *The Enquiry and You!* (May 1947).

⁷⁸Fred Lindop, 'Unofficial Militancy in the Royal Group of Docks 1945-67', *Oral History*, Volume 11 Number 2, Autumn 1983, p.27. This is another reference which I owe to Bob Aspinall of the Museum of London Library.

⁷⁹Cmd. 8236, p.7.

⁸⁰PRO: FO 800/519, Bevin to Ede, 11 July 1949.

consensus that under the pre-1940 casual system, dockers enjoyed a significant advantage which very few other groups of industrial workers shared: they were free to decide whether or not to try for work on any given day, and free to accept or reject any work which they were offered.⁸¹ Under the Dock Labour Scheme, these freedoms no longer existed. Workers had to attend each morning and afternoon, and had to accept the work which they were offered. Although the bulk of the workforce supported the Scheme, the loss of this historical privilege - and Leggett observed that 'dockers have long memories'⁸² - was keenly felt. In 1986 a TUC review of the Scheme's history emphasised the significance of these freedoms, and the workforce's perceived sense of injustice under the post-1940 regime: 'That freedom ended with the wartime schemes, with their demands that the men report regularly every day for work, or face disciplinary action ... the 1947 Scheme made these features permanent, with the disciplinary code being in some ways more severe than the codes which ruled in other industries.'⁸³

If not quite inevitable, it was surely always probable that great tensions would arise as the workforce adapted from one of the slackest disciplinary regimes in British industry to one of the toughest. Central to the strike in the London docks in March 1945, according to Arthur Deakin's sympathetic biographer, was the rigorous application of discipline under the war-time decasualisation scheme. This had been operating, 'at the margin of the men's tolerance'.⁸⁴ The reaction of the unofficial movement to the 'Zinc Oxide' affair, which led to the strike of June 1948, is surely also to be understood in terms of this awkward transition. For their initial refusal to load a cargo of zinc oxide, Coe's gang were suspended from the Scheme without pay for seven days. In addition, the men's entitlement to attendance money and guaranteed make-up was disallowed for three months, although this was reduced on appeal to two weeks. A workforce accustomed to casualism might well have agreed with the unofficial movement's assertion that this was a 'harsh and vicious punishment'.⁸⁵

⁸¹Above, pp.48-9.

⁸²Cmd. 8236, p.5.

⁸³Denis Delay, *Myths About the Origins and Effects of the National Dock Labour Scheme*, TUC paper, 1986.

⁸⁴V.L. Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*, p.186.

⁸⁵PRO: BK 2/72, Port Workers' Strike Committee, *The Men's Own Case*, June 1948.

The 1948 London strike committee emphasised its support for the Scheme, but argued that suspending men from seeking work or enjoying guaranteed maintenance was an unacceptable reversion to pre-war conditions, a 'throwback to the days of Casual Labour plus Poor Law Relief'.⁸⁶ Whilst the NDLB acknowledged the men's disquiet on this issue by reducing to four weeks the maximum period of suspension from the Scheme's benefits, the general antipathy with which the workforce regarded the new disciplinary regime was not removed. More than fourteen years after Bevin's war-time regulations had been introduced, the 1955 Devlin Inquiry found that the dockers' collective resistance to the Scheme's disciplinary mechanisms remained a significant source of tension. Devlin noted that, 'the docker who has been brought up to casual work valued his power of taking a day off if he wanted to - and still more, no doubt, the sense of feeling that he was free to take a day off if ever he wanted it - and at the end of a long and strenuous job running over a weekend he sometimes needed it.'⁸⁷

It would thus appear that although the Scheme had effectively banished the worst single feature of casual employment, namely the financial insecurity which stemmed from unemployment and underemployment, it had also stripped dockers of casualism's central and undeniable benefit, namely control over work and leisure patterns. Informal holidays, such as the London dock worker's annual hop-picking excursion to Kent, were forfeited under the Scheme which, according to Leggett, deprived dockers of, 'the pleasant side of a bad system'.⁸⁸ In addition, less savoury elements from the past, the wretched welfare amenities and the lottery of the free call, had not been dispensed with.

Leggett and Devlin both argued that the resultant tension was additionally aggravated by the actual manner in which the workforce had attained its greater financial security. This had nothing to do with the Scheme itself, but was essentially a result of generally favourable post-war economic conditions, and full employment in particular. Both reports suggested that these conditions had indirectly undermined the men's confidence in the Scheme, for few dockers were actually reliant upon its

⁸⁶PRO: BK 2/72, London Port Workers' Strike Committee, *Reflections on the Strike*, July 1948.

⁸⁷Cmd. 9813, p.17.

⁸⁸Cmd. 8236, p. 7.

benefits in terms of the guaranteed minimum income. The daily obligation to report at the docks and accept any available work appeared all the more onerous as a result.⁸⁹ Having to endure the downside of both casual recruitment and non-casual discipline, and essentially enjoying the benefits of neither of the two employment methods, dockers thus laboured under the worst of both worlds.

The unofficial strike of June 1948 directly confirmed that the workforce was unhappy with the Scheme's disciplinary framework. It attested also to a deeper problem, namely that the traditionally difficult relationship between the TGWU and its dock members had been complicated by the Union's role in the administration of the Scheme, and that the Union's authority had been particularly damaged by the participation of Union officials in the exercise of the Scheme's unpopular disciplinary procedures.

PROBLEMS FOR THE TGWU?

According to the National Dock Labour Board's own statistics, in addition to the large-scale unofficial strikes of 1948 and 1949, between July 1947 and October 1951 there were forty-two stoppages which cost the industry at least 1,000 working days. Significantly, the National Board records that thirty-one of these strikes were prompted by industrial disputes. At issue were piece-rates, holiday bonuses, compulsory overtime, the dismissals of allegedly unfit men, working methods and gang sizes. Of the other eleven, two resulted from the TGWU's expulsion of three dock members in 1950, and nine were in protest against the trial of seven dockers at the Old Bailey in 1951.⁹⁰ (These latter episodes are both discussed in Chapter Seven). All being unofficial, the thirty-one 'industrial' strikes defied the industry's established machinery for the resolution of disputes. But Fred Lindop has shown that this established machinery inadvertently promoted short stoppages. The origins of the 1948 strike particularly illustrate Lindop's argument that:

Following procedure before the institution of shop stewards in 1967 meant getting a full-time trade union official down to the ship, which might well take time. Most issues - over piece work or gang size or difficult conditions

⁸⁹Cmd. 8236, p.8, Cmd. 9813, p.17.

⁹⁰PRO: BK 2/71, Industrial Disputes, 1947-1951.

of work - required immediate action: going with procedure - which meant continuing to work - would necessarily weaken the men's argument, if only by removing the evidence.⁹¹

Of course, in the case of Coe's gang on 28 May 1948, the relevant official attempted to compensate for his distance from the ship by offering an immediate evaluation of the situation by telephone. Without even viewing the cargo of zinc oxide he sided with the employer rather than his members on the question of the appropriate piece-rate. This simply reinforces Lindop's general point, that the Union's physical distance from its dock members made an unofficial strike the likely outcome of a small-scale industrial dispute.

Whilst the unofficial movement sharply criticised Platt's handling of the zinc oxide dispute, it also drew hostile attention to the activities of the Union officials on the London Board's disciplinary tribunal. In an attempt to save their members from the sack, the outcome which employers on the tribunal sought, the Union officials had apparently advocated the penalties which were ultimately imposed. In the gang's own words: 'When the London Board met, Mr. Parsons [the head of Hay's Wharf Group, acting as Chairman] apparently asked for our dismissal, but Mr. Condon and other Trade Union leaders on the Board (who after all are there to defend us) in their graciousness suggested we should receive this harsh and vicious punishment.'⁹²

The unpopular repercussions of this initiative were felt by Arthur Deakin, when addressing an extremely restive crowd of dockers in Southwark Park on 25 June. One heckler apparently shouted at him, 'You come down to the docks and handle a cargo of zinc oxide. Do you good to get out of your armchair!'⁹³ The *Manchester Guardian's* labour correspondent suggested that this tension was to be understood in terms of the TGWU's enhanced political status, which had distanced Union leaders from their members. The correspondent made this significant judgement on the mood of the Southwark Park meeting, during which Deakin had made a characteristic assault on communism:

⁹¹Lindop, op. cit., p. 27.

⁹²PRO: BK 2/72, Port Workers' Strike Committee, *The Men's Own Case*, June 1948.

⁹³*Daily Worker*, 26 June 1948.

It was interesting that there was no outcry at this attack on Communism. The crowd did not seem to resent it, which suggests that this was not a Communist crowd. The hostility to Mr. Deakin seemed to derive from lack of confidence rather than political hostility. 'He is just the agent of the Government, that's all he is. That's all the Union is nowadays,' commented one docker to another during the meeting. It was a revealing comment, and it shows something of the problem that the trade unions have to face.⁹⁴

In a subsequent bulletin from the docks the same correspondent developed his idea that the strike illuminated a general problem which faced trade unions in the new situation of a Labour Government and full employment: 'One of the most serious things about the strike is the strength of feeling that the official leaders of big trade unions have joined a remote and potentially hostile "they" and are no longer among "us".'⁹⁵ John Lovell has demonstrated that an important characteristic of the industry's history had been the long-term failure of trade unions thoroughly to organise in the docks, and the national and industrial Union of port and transport workers which Bevin established in 1922 had been unable to overcome the weight of this tradition.⁹⁶ However, the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent was surely correct to detect a recent deterioration in relations between the TGWU and its dock members, and the strike certainly indicated that this historical tension had been exacerbated by the Union's association with the Scheme's unpopular disciplinary functions. Harry Fairlie, a correspondent covering the 1949 strike for *The Observer*, drew a similar conclusion. Having asked a striking docker about the TGWU and its insistence that members work the disputed Canadian ships, Fairlie was told, 'I tell you, mate, before the war Brother Deakin would have called these ships "black". It's he that's changed, not us.' Fairlie suggested that indeed Deakin's attitudes had changed. This was a result of the TGWU's new relationship with the Government, and this close identification with the power of the State had cost the Union dearly in terms of declining authority in the docks.⁹⁷

Neither the Government - dominated by the Scheme's principal architect, Ernest Bevin - nor the TGWU would admit that the Union was too closely identified with the the State; nor would either of them admit that

⁹⁴*Manchester Guardian*, 26 June 1948.

⁹⁵*Manchester Guardian*, 28 June 1948.

⁹⁶John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, pp. 214-218.

⁹⁷*The Observer*, 17 July 1949.

the participation of Union officials in the punishment of their own dock members was a potential source of conflict. This was perhaps natural enough, given Deakin's earlier description of the Union's role in the joint administration of the Scheme as 'a great experiment' in 'workers' control'.⁹⁸ On the other hand, the strikes were interpreted by port employers and the Ministry of Transport as evidence to support their 1947 fears that joint administration of the Scheme would cause trouble in the docks. In April 1947 the secretary of the National Association of Port Employers, A.F. Macdonald, had warned the National Dock Labour Corporation that the employers were in 'profound disagreement' with joint control. Macdonald had especially anticipated difficulty arising from the union officials' sharing responsibility for the exercise of discipline, such managerial functions being, 'alien to their office and must on occasion be irreconcilable with the natural demands of their constituents'.⁹⁹ In 1947 Ministry of Transport officials, most notably the Assistant Secretary at the Ministry's Docks and Canals Division, Aubrey Clark, had also expressed concern that union officials - unlike employers' representatives - would be unable to reconcile efficient administration of the Scheme with their traditional responsibilities. He had demanded a greater degree of independent representation to counter the inevitably sectional motivations of the union men.¹⁰⁰

Despite their formal obligations under the Scheme, port employers were never fully reconciled to its existence, and they duly used the 1948 and 1949 strikes to open a counter-attack on the system of joint administration. On 29 June 1948, as the unofficial movement called off the 'Zinc Oxide' strike, the London employers formally established a special sub-committee to consider possible modifications to the Scheme, were it to come under review. Sir Douglas Ritchie, a member of the National Dock Labour Board and therefore nominally committed to the status quo, was appointed to chair this committee.¹⁰¹ A few days later R.H. Senior, the chairman of the London employers, told colleagues on the National Association that he 'considered the present practice of Trade Union

⁹⁸Above, p.57.

⁹⁹PRO: MT 81/16, Macdonald to Saunders, 12 April 1947.

¹⁰⁰PRO: MT 63/408, Clark to Page, 15 July 1947.

¹⁰¹LML/LWA 73, Port Employers in London, 29 June 1948.

representatives acting as advocates on appeal tribunals [ie serving a dual function at disciplinary hearings] highly objectionable'.¹⁰²

Although desisting from positive action in 1948, after the 1949 strike the port employers strongly pressed the Government to order the various unions to withdraw from the Scheme's administration. The need for a formal approach to the Government was settled by a series of letters in August 1949 between Macdonald and one of his most senior National Association colleagues, the Liverpool shipowner J.R. Hobhouse. Hobhouse was particularly ebullient about the opportunity created by the unofficial movement's attacks on Deakin, suggesting that this 'may possibly create conditions under which the Transport and General Union could admit they were wrong in having gone onto the Board at all'.¹⁰³ On 11 August Hobhouse duly wrote to Alfred Barnes, the Minister of Transport, emphasising that joint control of the Scheme had been 'a great mistake'. The Unions, he continued, enjoyed ample scope for pursuing controversial issues on the National and Local Joint Councils, but as an executive body the Board had to be freed from these sometimes endless and often irresolvable arguments. In illustrating this point, Hobhouse cited the straightforward unions/employers division on the Board over the question of directing labour to the Canadian ships, which had been in Britain for more than two months before the Board finally ordered their clearance. According to Hobhouse, the role of the union representatives in ensuring this delay had caused immense damage to the industry and the country, allowing the workforce to believe that their action in 'blacking' the Canadian ships was justified. 'If the men are allowed to get away with this, they naturally think they can get away with anything and discipline breaks down generally. One need not be surprised,' he concluded, 'that a jointly constituted Executive body like the NDLB finds it difficult to handle such a situation with determination and consistency'.¹⁰⁴

There was nothing coincidental in the fact that the Employers' Association addressed its complaint to the Ministry of Transport rather than the Ministry of Labour. As noted in Chapter Two, Lord Callaghan believes that during this period shipowners enjoyed great influence at the Ministry of Transport, where he served as Parliamentary Secretary from

¹⁰²LML/LWA 57, National Association of Port Employers, 8 July 1948.

¹⁰³LML/BPA 244, Hobhouse to Macdonald, 8 August 1949.

¹⁰⁴LML/BPA 244, Hobhouse to Barnes, 11 August 1949.

1948 to 1950.¹⁰⁵ This explains the congruence of the positions adopted by Ministry officials and the employers in 1947, and also provides a significant insight into the objections to the Scheme which Barnes himself expressed during the 1949 strikes. Hobhouse received a brief and non-committal response from Barnes: 'This is a difficult and complex matter to which I have given much thought and I very much welcome your views.'¹⁰⁶ Yet the Minister had indeed been considering the matter. In July 1949 he recommended changes to the Scheme's administration in a paper submitted for the consideration of Cabinet. Arguing that joint administration of the Scheme was 'a serious weakness', he advocated - as his departmental officials had done in 1947 - increased independent representations on the National and local Boards. He contended that through becoming too closely identified with the National Dock Labour Board, the Ministry of Labour had compromised its functions as an objective conciliator, and recommended that the Ministry of Transport assume departmental responsibility for the Dock Labour Scheme.¹⁰⁷ Cabinet was unimpressed by these proposals, with Bevin informing the meeting of the likely outcome if it became known that the Scheme was under review: 'Grave disquiet was bound to be aroused among dock workers throughout the country, and encouragement would be given to all those unsettling elements which wished to bring an end to the Scheme and the benefits which it had conferred upon the Dock Workers generally.'¹⁰⁸

In July 1949, the junior Minister Callaghan also attempted to encourage a reappraisal of the Scheme, focusing on the TGWU's position in its administration and operation. If Barnes's views on the need for greater independent representation on the NDLB apparently coincided with those which Aubrey Clark had voiced in 1947, and seem to have been indirectly influenced by the employers long before his correspondence with Hobhouse, Callaghan's position was arrived at independently. Grounded on advice neither from Barnes nor departmental officials, it was, in his own words, derived: 'from my own experience in Cardiff [his constituency] and my observations from visiting all the major Ports in Britain'.¹⁰⁹ Based on

¹⁰⁵Above, p.67.

¹⁰⁶LML/BPA 244, Barnes to Hobhouse, 22 August 1949.

¹⁰⁷PRO: CAB 129/CP(49)145, 6 July 1949.

¹⁰⁸PRO: CAB 128/CM(49)46, 18 July 1949.

¹⁰⁹Lord Callaghan to Jim Phillips, 3 September 1992. (A copy of this letter is an appendix to this thesis).

recent first hand experience, Callaghan's identification of a relationship between unofficial strike action and the TGWU's share in the unpopular disciplinary functions of management, was particularly significant. Callaghan spelt out his observations on 15 July in a letter to the Prime Minister himself:

We all agree that a prior condition of industrial peace in the Docks is to restore the moral leadership of the Unions. In my view they cannot regain leadership as long as the local Union leaders have a half share in the disciplinary machinery of the Ports. As you know, they have equal representation with the Employers on local Port Committees, and so sit in judgement of their own members. They are both Judge and Advocate, and I have seen the consequences both in my own Constituency and in a number of the 24 major ports I have toured since I have been at this Ministry.

The system has had the result that the Dockers no longer regard the Unions as springing from them and belonging to them. The 'Union' has become no more than an organisation that a man must join if he is to hold a 'Card' and get a job. Because of its share in the disciplinary machine the 'Union' is not visibly on his side, and in some places the men stand in awe of the local Union official who wields so much power over them and can stop them from getting a job. But such a situation does not yield moral leadership. What is needed is to amend the disciplinary system so that the Union returns to its traditional role of acting as advocate, and ceases to be judge, leaving discipline to be imposed by a body independent of employers and men.¹¹⁰

Even from a relatively junior member of the Government, this was a strong reminder that the Scheme had greatly complicated the TGWU's relationship with its dock members; it was also an important private refutation of the administration's simplistic public position on the strikes. Attlee passed the letter on to Ernest Bevin, who sent a rather confused reply to Callaghan on 19 July. Possibly Bevin had not read Callaghan's letter properly, for he concerned himself largely with demonstrating that in South Wales a local decasualisation scheme - established as early as 1918 - which involved joint administrative control of discipline, had worked very effectively. He did not acknowledge that Callaghan's intention was to question the validity of the disciplinary mechanisms on a national scale.¹¹¹ With admirable boldness, Callaghan wrote to Bevin, emphasising that his argument was not based on the situation in South Wales alone, and nor was it based on opposition to the Scheme: 'the best thing the Dockers have ever had'. He added, however, that despite the Union's huge achievement in winning the

¹¹⁰PRO: FO 800/519, Callaghan to Attlee, 15 July 1949.

¹¹¹PRO: FO 800/519, Bevin to Callaghan, 19 July 1949.

Scheme, its influence in the docks had genuinely declined, and concluded by restating the case for independent disciplinary control: 'The Union is such a vital element in our industrial life that I want to see it regain its influence in the Docks, and I believe that changes in the disciplinary machinery would help it to do so. I would like to see discipline effected by a neutral body of which the Port Authority could be the nucleus.'¹¹²

Bevin's various certainties - with regard to the value of the TGWU, the Scheme and the wisdom of his personal judgements¹¹³ - were not shaken by Callaghan's approach; and he might well have pointed out, as Victor Allen has done, that the port authorities which Callaghan wished to have invested with disciplinary powers were seldom 'neutral bodies', but reflected almost exclusively the interests of the port employers.¹¹⁴ Also of significance, given Callaghan's insistence that his position had been arrived at independently, it should be remembered that in 1946 the Employers' Association had also called for port authorities to assume administrative control of discipline.¹¹⁵ Callaghan still maintains 'that disciplinary features of the Scheme were not working well'. In a graceful concession to his former colleague, he also indicates the prime reason for the Government's failure to recognise these defects: 'Ernest Bevin, as a senior heavyweight figure in the Government, obviously carried many more guns than I did and I know from conversation with him at the time and later that he regarded the introduction of the Dock Labour Scheme as one of his great achievements. And almost certainly felt that his experience and judgement was both longer and better than mine. He may well have been right.'¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, on Bevin's behalf, Attlee told Callaghan that he had raised a complex issue which the Government would be keeping an eye on.¹¹⁷

THE UNOFFICIAL MOVEMENT: COMMUNISTS AND FIGHTERS

Bevin's refusal to countenance even minor changes to the Scheme stemmed from his respect, as a responsible trade union leader, for agreements

¹¹²PRO: FO 800/519, Callaghan to Bevin, 20 July 1949.

¹¹³Hennessy and Jeffery, *op.cit.*, pp. 192-3.

¹¹⁴Allen, *op.cit.*, p. 180.

¹¹⁵PRO: MT 81/16, Macdonald to Donovan, 8 July 1946.

¹¹⁶Lord Callaghan to Jim Phillips, 3 September 1992.

¹¹⁷PRO: FO 800/519, Attlee to Callaghan, 21 July 1949.

which had resulted from collective bargaining. He generally took a dim view of people who refused to observe agreements, such as the Dock Labour Scheme, which had been arrived at in this manner. When he spoke, in opposing Barnes's call for a review of the Scheme, of 'unsettling elements' on 18 July 1949, he referred not only to the port employers who sought a restoration of their former administrative powers, but to the unofficial movement and the strikes which clearly contravened the workforce's obligations under the Scheme. The unofficial movement was consistently charged with - to use the favoured contemporary expression - 'fomenting' strikes in order to wreck the Dock Labour Scheme. This serious enough allegation was supplemented by accusations of political motivation, with communist dockers supposedly duping non-communist comrades into support for action that would damage the progress of Britain's economic recovery.

It has already been noted that the first charge, that the unofficial movement wanted to destroy the Dock Labour Scheme, was largely groundless. Whilst critical of the new discipline, the unofficial movement - in common with the vast majority of the workforce - welcomed the Scheme's benefits as a huge advance on pre-war casual conditions.¹¹⁸ The premise that a relationship existed between unofficial action and political motivation, is more difficult to assess, but in most ports communist influence in the unofficial movement was negligible. On the Mersey, the second largest docks system in Britain, the vast majority of dockers were hostile to communism. Presumably this partially reflected the Roman Catholic Church's influence in Liverpool; but one account suggests that it also resulted from the unofficial movement's suspicion that the Communist Party generally subordinated 'dock issues and unofficial movements to political objectives and winning influence in the TGWU'.¹¹⁹ Only in London were a significant number of communist activists prominent in the unofficial movement. Yet even in London the Party's influence was limited. The prominence of communists such as Ted Dickens, Harry Constable and Albert Timothy, was usually portrayed - by Government Ministers, Trade Union leaders and newspaper editors - as evidence that the London unofficial committees were motivated by straightforward ideological devotion to Cominform. Actually, this was far from the truth. Although

¹¹⁸Lindop, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, p.30.

reflecting with unwarranted sentimentality on 'The Lost World of British Communism', Raphael Samuel has provided the perceptive insight that for its adherents in the immediate post-war, pre-1956 period, communism was 'a moral vocation as well as a political practice'. Being a communist meant working on behalf of others, and this moral commitment was central to a communist's involvement in unofficial trade union activity.¹²⁰ For communist dockers, this meant assuming unofficial leadership in order to defend the interests of their work-mates, and the Communist Party usually found that members in the docks were not prepared to subordinate these interests to Party discipline. It is worth remembering, for instance, that communists were active in the 1945 strike despite the Party's opposition, and Party influence in the docks was further minimised by the workforce's parochial outlook. Ironically, perhaps, the occupational and local loyalties which made dockers such a difficult workforce for the TGWU to organise, also impeded the Communist Party, and its industrial organisers also complained that communist dockers shared these loyalties.¹²¹ According to a contemporary Trotskyist activist, in 1952 Harry Constable and Albert Timothy both left the Communist Party, such was their disillusion with its insistence that Party interests should always take precedence over dock affairs.¹²² The unofficial movement was not interested, it would appear, in generalising the class struggle, but in furthering industrial issues which specifically affected dock workers.

A number of contemporary observers also argued that the unofficial movement had, in any event, emerged from industrial rather than political circumstances. Reporting from the London docks during the 1948 strike, the *Manchester Guardian* labour correspondent lamented:

There is nostalgia for the fighting days of Ernest Bevin and Ben Tillet. At one meeting I heard a docker say of the official trade union speaker, 'Ernie smoked Woodbines. I bet he smokes Players.' The social gap between Woodbines and Players has narrowed, but it is still a psychological chasm. Losing faith in the official leaders, the dockers are still anxious to find men to lead them. There is a vacuum of leadership [which] is being filled temporarily by the strike committee ...¹²³

¹²⁰Raphael Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism', *New Left Review*, No. 154, November-December 1985, p.46.

¹²¹Lindop, op. cit., p.30.

¹²²Notes of conversation with Cyril Smith, 5 August 1992. (These notes are also included as an appendix).

¹²³*Manchester Guardian*, 28 June 1948.

The premise that the unofficial movement was an industrial rather than a political force, performing traditional trade union duties which sections of the workforce perceived TGWU officials to have abandoned, was repeated in a report produced by the Field Survey Group of the British Institute of Management. This research, conducted largely in the London docks after the 1948 strike, noted that paid trade union officials were not subject to the same pressures as dock workers, which sometimes caused them to reach agreements with employers that their members found much harder to accept. The tension which this created was greatly exacerbated by the involvement of these officials in the management of the Scheme, which reinforced the workforce's sense of estrangement: 'many workers have lost confidence in their leaders and workers' leaders have emerged who perform the traditional function of fighting the employer, and if need be the trade union officials and the government as well.'¹²⁴ Not surprisingly, the report was condemned by the industry's National Joint Council, which jealously regarded it as unwarranted outside intervention,¹²⁵ but Morrison and Attlee disagreed, feeling that it merited 'serious attention'.¹²⁶ As such, the BIM report quite possibly influenced the Government's decision - discussed in the following chapter - to appoint the Leggett Committee of Inquiry in May 1950.

The Leggett report confirmed that the Union had damaged its standing in the docks by administering discipline,¹²⁷ and the 1955 Devlin Inquiry re-emphasised that it was this loss of standing which had instigated the unofficial movement's emergence. According to Devlin, the movement's political character was of secondary significance. Very few dockers were communists and indeed most had little time for communism; but they did not 'regard a vigorous leader as disqualified from expressing their grievances because he is a communist'. Devlin disputed the perceived wisdom that every docker who regularly assumed unofficial leadership in the docks - the 'persistent agitator' - was either a communist or an

¹²⁴PRO: CAB 21/2653, Field Survey Group of the British Institute of Management, 'Research in the London Docks', Interim Report 31 December 1948.

¹²⁵PRO: BK 2/283, National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry, 12 May 1950.

¹²⁶PRO: PREM 8/1534, Attlee to Morrison, 3 May 1950.

¹²⁷Cmd. 8236, p.13.

especially subversive or dangerous figure. Rather he was perhaps merely quick to spot a grievance and articulate it for others as well as himself: 'In short, he is the stuff out of which in the past many trade union leaders were made and he may be no more than what is called a militant trade unionist.'¹²⁸

These various observations about the difficult and complex underlying situation in the docks reinforce the argument that essentially industrial issues were behind the three large unofficial strikes. These strikes were clearly not politically motivated. The unofficial movement was not consciously attempting to hamper British economic recovery; nor was it seeking to strengthen Stalin's icy grip on the world by destabilising Europe through the disruption of Marshall Aid. To fuse Devlin's characterisation of the 'persistent agitator' with Lewis Minkin's analysis of labour movement culture, the unofficial strikes represented a specific defence of traditional 'trade union values'. Vast sums of loyalty and solidarity were evinced, not only throughout the remarkable and huge nationwide strike of 1945, but also in London and elsewhere during the 1948 and 1949 strikes. In 1948 large numbers of men indicated their determination to stand by the eleven suspended workers. In the more drawn-out affair of 1949, the motives of the workers involved in the stoppages were varied: some men probably wished to demonstrate positive solidarity with the Canadian seamen; others perhaps simply took the chance of an informal 'holiday' which they no longer enjoyed under the Dock Labour Scheme. In all ports, however, the over-riding issue was the unofficial defence of a near-sacred dockland principle, the right to avoid black-legging in a dispute between another group of workers, the Canadian seamen, and their employers.¹²⁹

Arthur Deakin and his TGWU colleagues had an entirely different understanding of these values: 'loyalty' was a quality which dockers owed to official union representatives; and 'solidarity' a quality to be demonstrated with the Labour Government by refraining from the kind of irresponsible action which unofficial strikes represented. Deakin certainly had no sympathy with the notion that unofficial leaders were simply articulating grievances which they shared with their fellows in the docks. Following the 1949 strike, Deakin had told the Union's Docks Group that

¹²⁸Cmd. 9813, pp.16-19.

¹²⁹Cmd. 8236, p.7.

these men, 'had sought to bring this Union into discredit, they had sought to dishonour and disrupt'. He had also spoken of his determination that these activists would 'face the music' and be expelled from the Scheme.¹³⁰ In seeking to fulfil this promise by turning the weight of his Union on these men, Deakin inadvertently brought to the surface the underlying problems in the docks which he - along with the Government - had hitherto attempted to obscure by disingenuously ascribing the recurrence of strike action to political subversion. This provoked the tension between the Government and the TGWU which is the subject of the final chapter of this thesis.

¹³⁰DNTGC, 21 July 1949.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ALLIANCE UNDER STRAIN: THE 1950-51 LABOUR GOVERNMENT AND THE DOCKS

THE 1950 GOVERNMENT

The Labour Government elected in February 1950 carried nothing like the confidence or vitality of its 1945 predecessor. The contrast to the glad hopes of July 1945 was partly due to the party's reduced Parliamentary circumstances. The General Election gave Labour 315 seats, the Conservatives and their associates 298: of the other twelve opposition MPs, nine were Liberals.¹ When the new Cabinet met for the first time on 25 February, Attlee told colleagues that with a Government majority of only five, there would be 'no question of attempting to carry through any of the major controversial legislation which had been promised in the Party's Election manifesto'.² This set the precedent for the one other significant difference from 1945. Whilst dogged by a range of international and economic problems, the 1945 Government had maintained labour movement morale with the range of legislative measures which had established 'the welfare state' and taken several industries, utilities and the Bank of England into public ownership. The 1950-51 Government, in contrast, was not able to offset international and economic difficulties - which, if anything grew more acute in these two years - in the same manner. Even more than in the post-1947 years of Crippsian austerity and Morrisonian consolidation, it seemed that the Government's task was simply to defend the gains of 1945. Indeed, having rejected the prospect of bringing 'controversial legislation' forward, by November 1950 the Government was having difficulty in finding sufficient legislative business to consume the available Parliamentary time.³

The 1950 Government's main difficulties, economic pressure and international tension, were intimately connected. Against the background of escalating international tension, in the spring of 1951 the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Gaitskell, prepared a budget that

¹Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-1951*, p.405.

²PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)5, 25 February 1950.

³Morgan, *op.cit.*, p.462.

allowed for a huge increase - £4,700 million for the three years 1951-54 - in defence spending. The budget also brought to a head a long-running internal Government debate about the funding of the National Health Service. Gaitskell resolved this debate by introducing charges for dental and optical treatment, and prescriptions. These charges amounted to an annual saving of some £13 million, which was a sizable fraction of the NHS's overall budget of approximately £400 million. They were also the occasion of a Government split which was to have damaging long-term implications for the Labour Party. As Minister of Health, Aneurin Bevan had accepted the principle of prescription charges in October 1949, but he had vigorously resisted pressure to introduce them - along with other charges - in practice for more than two years. On 22 April 1951, following the Third Reading of the Bill which enshrined the introduction of these charges, Bevan resigned from the Government.⁴

Thus were the divisive internal party battle lines of the 1950s drawn. The 1951 Budget was also to jeopardise economic recovery, diminish the Government's popularity, and so bring nearer the days of Opposition in which these internal party divisions were manifested. Attention was drawn to the serious economic damage which the programme would cause by the other Cabinet Minister to resign, Harold Wilson. In his personal statement to the House of Commons, Wilson remarked that Gaitskell's rearmament programme was physically incompatible with the available raw material resources. The consequence of this was that, 'the basis of our economy is disrupted and the standard of living, including the social services of our people, is endangered.'⁵ This pessimism proved to be amply justified, for in the course of 1951 a massive set-back to the country's economic recovery was indeed revealed. From its healthy surplus of £300 million at the close of 1950, by the end of 1951 the balance of payments was once again running a huge deficit, the total negative balance exceeding £400 million. Admittedly this was the consequence of several other factors, such as a sudden increase in import prices and increased dollar purchases by other sterling area countries.⁶ Yet for Alec Cairncross, the fundamental cause of the balance of payments crisis was the stress placed on the British economy by

⁴Charles Webster, *The Health Services Since The War. Volume I*, pp. 133-77.

⁵*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 487, 228, 24 April 1951.

⁶Morgan, *op.cit.*, p.477.

the rearmament programme which the Government adopted to fall in with American wishes.⁷

In its economic and international policies, the 1950 Government continued to enjoy the Trade Union support which had kept the previous Labour Government on course after the 1947 financial crisis. However, in September 1950, with the immediate trade deficit problem apparently resolved, the TUC loosened formal economic support for the Government by dropping its commitment to the wage freeze. This deprived the Government of important support when it embarked upon the rearmament programme in 1951. Between 1945 and 1950 the Government had found no greater Trade Union supporter than Arthur Deakin and the Transport and General Workers' Union. Deakin avidly maintained his loyalty to the Government after 1950, remaining a committed advocate of the wage freeze until the last in September 1950. This loyalty he apparently offered as his side of the great labour alliance bargain which had under-pinned the movement's work since 1945, but it was, in fact, given despite a considerable amount of private strain between Ministers and the TGWU. This tension was caused by the Government's growing reluctance to allow the TGWU sole responsibility for maintaining the workplace discipline of its dock members. In disturbing the labour alliance's informal 'rules' of behaviour, the Government inadvertently provoked tension with one of its most important supporters.

THE EXPULSIONS STRIKE, APRIL 1950

In July 1949, in the immediate aftermath of the unofficial strike in London, Arthur Deakin had informed Union colleagues that he was determined to take action against the 'certain people' who were prominent in the unofficial movement.⁸ This stated ambition clearly had some bearing on a resolution which was jointly put by the Union's London Area and London Docks Group Committees to the TGWU General Executive Council on 15 December 1949. This called for an Inquiry into the involvement of eight

⁷Alec Cairncross, *Years of Recovery. British Economic Policy 1945-51*, p.233.

⁸DNTGC, 21 July 1949.

dock members in the 1949 strike. The resolution was carried,⁹ and the Inquiry took place at Transport House on 27 January 1950.

Like the official TGWU investigation into the 1948 strike which had taken place in February 1949, the Inquiry was held under the auspices of a special five-man committee, chaired by Union President Fryer and including Arthur Deakin as an ex-officio member. The hearing was attended by members of the Union's London Area and London Area Docks Group Committees, and the eight London dockers whose activities on the unofficial movement had aroused the Union's wrath: Blomberg, Constable, Cronin, Dash, Dickens, Kirby, Marney and Saunders. The London Union officials' case against the eight consisted essentially of two points. Firstly, the 1949 strikes had breached the TGWU's agreements with employers, and the obligations of the Union and its members under the Dock Labour Scheme. Secondly, membership of the unofficial committee - which continued in existence after July 1949 as the Port Workers' Defence Committee - was incompatible with membership of the Union. In pursuit of the latter point, the example of an unofficially convened meeting at Canning Town Hall on 7 August 1949 was offered, 'at which the Union and certain of its officers had been vilified and the policy of the Union held up to ridicule'. The officials were especially critical of Dickens, Constable and Saunders, whose involvement in the strike evidently contradicted an assurance which they had given to the February 1949 investigation, that in future they would not associate themselves with unofficial activity. In their defence, the three argued that this assurance had been falsely given on their behalf by a spokesman at the previous hearing who had not represented their views properly. In answering the charges, Dickens also restated the unofficial movement's position that the Canadian-related stoppage had not been a strike, but a lock-out on the part of the employers, with the lock-out committee being formed to maintain organisation in lieu of official recognition. In giving further evidence of their defiance, four of the 'accused' illuminated the essentially industrial character of the unofficial movement which was discussed in the previous chapter. Constable, Marney and Dash, along with Dickens, 'openly stated that their actions in relation to any particular issue arising in dockland must be governed by the circumstances therewith'. As practical men concerned

⁹MRC/MSS. 126/T&G/1/1/27, TGWU General Executive Council, 15 December 1949.

with defending what they perceived to be the interests of their fellow dockers, they consequently refused to offer any assurances as to their future conduct and observation of the Union's rules and constitution. In the words of Dickens, apparently the unofficial leader of the unofficial leaders, 'he would continue to support the Port Workers Defence Committee while it was doing its best, in his opinion, to further the fundamental principles of trade unionism'. Only Cronin dissociated himself from the movement and its activities.¹⁰

The Committee of Inquiry reported on 7 March, and reminded the General Executive of the February 1949 Investigation's warning that 'serious notice' would be taken of members who maintained their involvement in unofficial activity. Given the previous appearance of Dickens, Constable and Saunders at an Executive Inquiry, and their persistent 'complete disregard for the obligations resting upon them as Members', it was recommended that all three be immediately expelled from the TGWU. The Committee was also highly critical of Dash and Marney, but as their actions had not previously been the subject of an official inquiry, they - along with Blomberg and Kirby - were only to be debarred from holding Union office. The Committee advocated that Cronin, who had apologised for his unofficial activities, simply be given a warning as to his future conduct. One further recommendation was added, namely that the Executive declare the Port Workers' Defence Committee to be, 'a subversive body created and fostered with the object of sabotaging the constitutional procedure and policy of the Union'.¹¹

The General Executive accepted these recommendations on 7 March.¹² The personal implications for the disciplined men were, and indeed remained, unclear. Noting that he and his six comrades were all communists, Jack Dash believed the Inquiry to have been part of the Union's general anti-communist campaign. As this had already involved the 1949 ban on communists from lay and delegate office, all seven were in any case ineligible for office. Thus, the punishments exacted on himself, Blomberg, Marney and Kirby, were of symbolic rather than practical

¹⁰MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/28, TGWU General Executive Council, 6-10 March 1950, Appendix III, 'Unofficial London Docks Strike (1949). Report of the Special Committee etc.'

¹¹Ibid.

¹²MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/28, TGWU General Executive Council, 7 March 1950.

importance.¹³ For the three expelled men, however, there did appear to be practical problems. At unofficial meetings held in the ensuing period, the fear was frequently expressed that without a Union card, Dickens, Constable and Saunders would be unable to find work in the docks.¹⁴ These three, along with Blomberg, therefore appealed against the Executive's decision, and set about developing support for their position in the docks.

That they could count on considerable support, in the form of unofficial industrial action, had already been evinced by an unofficially organised ban on overtime held to coincide with the TGWU Inquiry on 26 and 27 January. Of 4,331 men required to put in overtime on 26 January, 2,872 refused to do so. In the Royal Docks, where the seven men worked, more than 2,000 men supported the ban, against 519 who did not.¹⁵

With the appeals of the four due to be heard on 14 April, the tense enough situation in the London docks was suddenly complicated by an unexpected dispute between the port's other trade union, the 7,000 member National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers' Union, and a large ship-owning firm, the Shaw Savill and Albion Company. In general terms, despite having failed to secure a review of the Scheme in August 1949, port employers still remained committed to an overhaul of the Scheme and other changes in working practices. At the Annual General Meeting of the National Association of Port Employers on 31 March, the Executive's yearly report was presented by the Liverpool shipowner, J.R. Hobhouse. The preceding year had, he said, 'shown few notable achievements', with the industry's central problem being the workforce's lack of discipline. Only greater discipline would ensure a quicker turn-around of shipping, but for this end employers would have to fight: 'They should not hesitate to insist upon an important matter of principle, even if it led to a stoppage, because every stoppage where the employer could be proved right meant less stoppages in future.'¹⁶ In seeking a restoration of discipline, Hobhouse was particularly concerned that the Unions should withdraw from the NDLB. In extracting greater efficiency from the workforce, one of his London colleagues, Sir Basil Sanderson, had a more practical solution.

¹³Daniel Ballard and David E. Martin, 'Jack Dash', *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Volume IX (1993), p.60.

¹⁴*The Times*, 27 April 1950.

¹⁵PRO: LAB 10/940, London RIRO to Headquarters, 26 January 1950.

¹⁶LML/LWA 57, National Association of Port Employers, 5th Annual General Meeting, 31 March 1950.

On Wednesday 12 April Sanderson announced that his company, Shaw Savill and Albion, intended from Monday 17 April to engage an unspecified number of dock workers on weekly rather than daily terms, and that these workers would be recruited inside rather than outside the dock gates. For a number of reasons this proposal was highly controversial. Shaw Savill's existing recruitment policy reflected traditional occupational divisions, with members of the Stevedores' Union employed to load and pack cargoes, and TGWU men employed for unloading. Elsewhere in the port, many TGWU men were already weekly employees, and some TGWU members indicated that they were willing to accept weekly terms from Shaw Savill. But the Stevedores' Union, which had never accepted weekly terms, regarded the plan as an unacceptable alteration of established working customs. Since the end of the nineteenth century, stevedores had claimed the right to undertake the most skilled aspects of dock work, the loading and packing of cargoes on board ships. An additional claim, the right to be engaged outside the dock gates and not on employers' premises, also dated from this period, and stevedores had resisted previous attempts to revoke it, most recently in March 1945. Stevedores apparently believed that the loss of these 'rights' would substantially dilute their Union's independent status. Accepting a greater regularity of employment, as the TGWU had done, would be tantamount to accepting 'dockers' terms', and would invite a strengthening of the TGWU's position at the Stevedores' expense.¹⁷ These difficulties were aggravated by the particular position of Sanderson's company. According to the *Manchester Guardian's* labour correspondent, the Stevedores' Union had 'provided workers for Shaw Savill and Albion for generations'.¹⁸ The NASDU suspected that if Shaw Savill, which was one of the largest employers in the Royal Docks, was prepared to review practices which had prevailed for so long, then other employers would certainly attempt to revise their employment arrangements. Ministry of Labour officials who were monitoring the situation duly concluded that a dispute between Shaw Savill and the Stevedores' Union was inevitable, and that it would be entirely of Sir Basil's making.¹⁹

On 11 April Arthur Bird, the TGWU Docks Group Secretary, told the Ministry of Labour's London officer, A.S. Andrews, that the appeals had 'no

¹⁷*Manchester Guardian*, 14 April 1950.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹PRO: LAB 10/955, A.S. Andrews to J.A. Diack, 11 April 1950.

chance of success', and added his fear that with the Shaw Savill problem blowing up at the same time, an unofficial stoppage in the docks was likely.²⁰ Each of Bird's forecasts proved to be correct. On Friday 14 April the Shaw Savill scheme was rejected by the Stevedores' Executive, which hinted that an official strike would take place if the company followed out its threat to operate the plan on the Monday. In the event, the company postponed the scheme's introduction, submitting it for further discussions with the Union, which were to be chaired by the Ministry of Labour.²¹ However, instead of going on official strike, during the following week many stevedores did find themselves taking unofficial action in support of the expelled TGWU men. On the same day that the Stevedores rejected the Shaw Savill scheme, 14 April, the TGWU's Rank and File Appeals Committee was convened to hear the dockers' cases. There were no dockers on this Committee, which consisted of six rank and file members who had been elected by the Union's Biennial Delegate Conference. On the first day of the hearing, the appellants presented a petition which had been signed by several thousand dockers, calling for their punishments to be revoked.²² The petition and the appeal which it supported were both in vain, however, and on the following Tuesday, 18 April, the Executive Council's original verdicts were upheld.²³ The next day, 19 April, saw the start of an unofficial strike after an early morning mass meeting of around 3,000 dock workers at Connaught Fields in East London's Canning Town. According to the Union's London Docks Group officer, Condon, the meeting's resolution in support of strike action, strongly condemned the TGWU Executive.²⁴ However, as Bird had anticipated, the unofficial movement - which comprised members of both unions - used the Shaw Savill problem to maximise trouble arising from the TGWU disciplinary tribunal. The meeting on 19 April was addressed by the Stevedores' member and chairman of the 1949 Lock-out Committee, Albert Timothy, and also by Ted Dickens. Two days later, on 21 April at an unofficial meeting in Victoria Park, Dickens explicitly linked the Stevedores' dispute with Shaw Savill to his own expulsion from the TGWU. He argued: 'the attack on the stevedores

²⁰Ibid.

²¹*The Times*, 18-21 April 1950.

²²*The Times*, 15 April 1950.

²³DNTGC, 20 April 1950.

²⁴PRO: LAB 10/955, Stillwell to Whitlock, 19 April 1950.

and the attack by Deakin on his members are one and the same thing. Both are aimed at worsening port workers' conditions.' The meeting passed a resolution demanding a ballot of 'all port workers' on the question of whether the expulsions should be ratified or overturned.²⁵

In the face of this renewed unofficial pressure, Deakin was characteristically defiant. Drawing attention to his personal determination to see through the campaign against the unofficial movement, he told the Union's Docks Group Committee that there was no question of the expulsions being reversed: 'He had had to suffer a good deal of abuse but his work over a very long period for this Union would speak for itself.'²⁶ As support for the strike gathered momentum, with the total of 6,000 strikers on 20 April increasing to around 12,500 on Monday 24 April,²⁷ Deakin reiterated his attack on the unofficial movement. On 23 April strike leaders gathered outside Transport House and demanded an audience with Deakin who was not, in fact, inside the building. After this farcical incident had taken place, he issued a statement condemning 'this indefensible strike'. It was contrary to the national interests, extremely damaging to food supplies and exports, and also: 'a challenge to those principles upon which trade unionism rests, to the right of trade unions to make their own rules and constitution. Those who advise trade unionists to defy their own union are guilty of reckless and irresponsible conduct.' Deakin added that in favouring a ballot on the expulsions - which clearly had no place under the rules of the Union - the strike leaders were seeking to save face. No such compromise was possible, however, and the dispute would only end with the men going back to work, the expulsions and the Union's authority intact.²⁸

The strike ended on 29 April, six days later, after the London Dock Labour Board had issued an ultimatum to the men on strike: those not at work on Monday 1 May would be summarily dismissed from the Scheme. In Victoria Park an unofficial meeting resolved to resume work 'after ten days powerful protest', and pledged that the fight to reinstate the expelled three to the TGWU would continue in Union branch meetings. The ultimate futility of this campaign was tacitly conceded by the expelled three,

²⁵PRO: LAB 10/955, London RIRO to Headquarters, 21 April 1950.

²⁶DNTGC, 20 April 1950.

²⁷*The Times*, 21 and 25 April 1950.

²⁸*The Times*, 24 April 1950.

however, with Constable, Dickens and Saunders all declaring their intention to apply for membership of the Stevedores' Union.²⁹ Whether they did so or not will remain unclear until Mr Andrew Flinn of the National Museum of Labour History has completed the process of properly sorting the NASDU's records. Nevertheless, the evidence of a contemporary Trotskyist activist in London might at least be recorded. He believes that whilst Dickens and Saunders did join the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union, Harry Constable remained for a number of years the only working docker in the Port of London without a union card.³⁰

The strike's important related feature, the dispute between the Shaw Savill shipping company and the NASDU, was apparently also resolved during the first week of May. Again, the Union's unsorted files make it difficult to ascertain the precise outcome and aftermath of this dispute, but on 2 May Shaw Savill did agree to the scheme's indefinite postponement.³¹

THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE: A 'WHOLESOME DETERRENT'?

The ten day unofficial strike had cost the industry 93,750 working days,³² and had clearly caused fresh damage to the Union's already tarnished reputation in the docks. In noting that Deakin had described the unofficial leaders as 'reckless and irresponsible', *The Times* correspondent pointed out that the men on strike strongly supported these men and had little time for their official leaders: 'Rightly or wrongly, the men on strike had for a long time felt little loyalty towards the elected representatives, but regarded the "reckless and irresponsible" leaders as vigilant in their interests.'³³

This apparent disdain with which the strikers regarded the Union, confirmed the Government's growing belief that the TGWU was unable to command a satisfactory level of authority in the docks. Throughout the strike Deakin continued to enjoy the loyal support of his former TUC colleague, George Isaacs, who told the House of Commons that the stoppage was a 'communist inspired' attack on the TGWU's democratic and

²⁹PRO: LAB 10/955, London RIRO note of meeting, 29 April 1950.

³⁰Notes of conversation with Cyril Smith, 5 August 1992. Constable and Smith became political comrades after the former had resigned from the Communist Party in 1952.

³¹*The Times*, 3 May 1950.

³²PRO: BK 2/71, Industrial Disputes, 1950.

³³*The Times*, 24 April 1950.

constitutional position.³⁴ Displaying his customary determination to allow the Union to restore order itself, on 21 April Isaacs urged his Cabinet colleagues to avoid any action - particularly the introduction of troops - that would prejudice developments.³⁵ During previous strikes such caution had characterised the Government response, but fewer Ministers were willing to support Isaacs on this occasion. On 20 April Maurice Webb, the Minister of Food, told the Cabinet Emergencies Committee that - negligible quantities of eggs and bananas aside - there was no danger of losing perishable items before 27 April. Nevertheless, the Committee decided that matters should not be allowed to slide: if the strike had not ended by Monday 24 April, troops would be deployed immediately to discharge non-food and food cargoes.³⁶ Troops accordingly began work in the Royal Docks on 24 April, a development which Cabinet endorsed on the following morning, undeterred by its awareness that the presence of soldiers had caused many more dockers to stop work in protest. Indeed, Ministers ordered that tented accommodation be made available in London parks so that, if necessary, up to 20,000 soldiers could be employed in the docks.³⁷

This would have been the largest single post-war commitment of troops in the London docks, exceeding by several thousand the total of 12,792 which was deployed in July 1949.³⁸ But the Government's tough response involved more than the use of troops. At the Emergencies Committee meeting on 20 April, consideration had been given to the question of whether criminal proceedings could be taken against the strikers. Sir Hartley Shawcross, the Attorney General, contended that this would not be possible. Under a 1940 emergency regulation that was still in force, Order 1305, which provided for the compulsory arbitration of trade disputes and forbade strikes and lock-outs in connection with trade disputes, the stoppage was not strictly a 'trade dispute'. However, this did not rule out the possibility of civil action against the strikers for breach of contract or, for that matter, criminal action against the 'ring leaders' for conspiring to procure a breach of contract. Despite the numbers involved, civil proceedings were strongly supported by Aneurin Bevan who, in an

³⁴*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 474, Col. 331, 20 April 1950.

³⁵PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)23, 21 April 1950.

³⁶PRO: CAB 134/177, EC, 20 April 1950.

³⁷PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)25, 25 April 1950.

³⁸Above, p.152.

echo of the tough line which he had taken during the 1948 and 1949 strikes, stated that for the striking dockers, 'the mere fact of having to attend court, and of having financial penalties imposed would constitute a wholesome long-term deterrent'.³⁹

This development denoted a significant departure from the informal 'rules' which governed the relationship between the Labour party and the Trade Unions. Wherever possible, the party was expected to leave the responsibility for dealing with trades disputes to the movement's 'industrial' wing, the trade unions.⁴⁰ These 'rules' had largely determined the 1945 Government's attitude to the docks: whilst using troops to protect the wider community from the effects of unofficial action, the Government had left the job of restoring discipline amongst the workforce to the TGWU. The 1950 strike demonstrated that the Union's internal disciplinary mechanisms had palpably failed to restore order, and in discussing the prospect of legal proceedings against unofficial strikers, Ministers indicated that the Government might be willing to take disciplinary matters out of the Union's hands. On 21 April Cabinet decided to defer legal action which would, if it was successful, have required the London Dock Labour Board to dismiss thousands of strikers for breaching their obligations under the Scheme.⁴¹ Nevertheless, in expounding their views, Shawcross and Bevan anticipated the unprecedented legal action which the Government was to take under Order 1305 against seven dockers less than twelve months later.

In the meantime, an alternative initiative by the Government did effect a positive breach in the labour movement's informal 'rules'. In Cabinet on 24 April it was finally - and remarkably - conceded that, 'quite apart from Communist agitation', the recurrent unofficial action in the docks suggested wider industrial problems: 'It was said that dockers were not clear who was their employer and with whom authority rested: there seemed to be a considerable element of ambiguity about the respective positions of the Dock Labour Board and of the employers who used dock labour.'⁴² On 1 May, as the workforce voted to resume work, there was general Cabinet agreement that the stoppage had raised a sufficient

³⁹PRO: CAB 134/177, EC, 20 April 1950.

⁴⁰Lewis Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance*, pp.27-40.

⁴¹PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)23, 21 April 1950.

⁴²PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)24, 24 April 1950.

number of complex industrial matters to merit a thorough and formal inquiry for the purpose of identifying the causes of unrest in the docks.⁴³ Such an investigation would inevitably draw attention to the Scheme's defects, and the fact that the workforce was recurrently willing to strike in defiance of its Union leaders. Yet Ministers apparently failed to realise that its decision would certainly draw the wrath of the TGWU, the troubled guardian of both the Dock Labour Scheme and the restive workforce. Perhaps suspecting an outbreak of collective Cabinet insensitivity, on 2 May the Cabinet Secretary, Norman Brook, briefed Attlee on the delicacy of the situation. He pointed out that when a review of the Scheme had previously been suggested, by Alfred Barnes in July 1949, Bevin had been adamantly opposed. 'In these circumstances,' he doubted the wisdom of appointing a formal inquiry with wide terms of reference, recommending a private Ministerial investigation instead: 'The constitution and procedure of the Dock Labour Boards, the efficacy of trade union leadership, the docker's relations with his union leaders and his employers, and the improvement of the general psychological situation in the docks - are all matters on which practical recommendations could be formulated as well by Ministers as by independent outsiders or experts.'⁴⁴

Thus advised, and indeed in the company of Brook, on 5 May Attlee met Isaacs and Barnes to discuss the proposed inquiry. Barnes repeated the point which he had made the previous July, about the Ministry of Labour's close association with the Scheme diminishing its ability to conciliate on dock matters effectively. More importantly, on this occasion he gave new emphasis to the problem of joint control of the Scheme. Whereas in 1949 he had spoken of the need to bolster dock boards with independent representatives, he now spoke explicitly about the Union's conflicting priorities. The primary function of a trade union official was to safeguard the interests of his members, but officials who administered the Scheme, particularly its disciplinary functions, had become estranged from their members. Adding that the dock labour boards obscured the relationship between worker and employer, making it difficult for the latter to take responsible action when trouble arose, Barnes argued in favour of a 'searching inquiry into the working of the Dock Labour Scheme'. This would be undertaken by the Ministries of Labour and Transport in

⁴³PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)27, 1 May 1950.

⁴⁴PRO: PREM 8/1534, Brook to Attlee, 2 May 1950.

consultation with the dock labour boards, employers, trade unions, the British Transport Commission and port authorities. Isaacs was strongly opposed to such an inquiry, which would give the impression that the Dock Labour Scheme had collapsed throughout the country, and cause grave offence to Arthur Deakin, who had already stated his opposition. In its place, Isaacs favoured a 'survey' into the causes of industrial unrest in the London docks alone. With counsel divided, Attlee concluded the meeting in characteristic fashion. Leaning, it would seem, slightly towards Isaacs, he tactfully advised his colleagues to pursue the idea of a 'survey' with Bevin, and make recommendations in the light of the latter's views.⁴⁵

A meeting between the three Ministers was held later on the same day, 5 May. Bevin naturally rejected the type of inquiry envisaged by Barnes, but was only marginally less annoyed by Isaacs's proposal. His disapproval was based on the fact that any kind of inquiry would ill reward his beloved TGWU after its strenuous efforts to support the Government. Bevin seldom wrote to other Ministers about dock matters, presumably preferring to buttonhole colleagues for an informal chat between meetings. Thus, the fact that on this occasion he set out his objections to an inquiry in a formal letter to Isaacs, suggests that he viewed the situation as being particularly serious. He told Isaacs that subsequent to their meeting on 5 May, he had spoken to Arthur Deakin (mysteriously referred to as 'our mutual friend'), who bitterly resented the imminent appointment of an inquiry into the docks. Having battled to win the Dock Labour Scheme, which was a vital weapon in the battle for economic recovery, and having courted the unpopularity of his members by throwing the TGWU's full weight behind strategies designed to support the Government further - most notably the wage freeze and the anti-communist campaign - Deakin's anger and disappointment were keenly felt. As Bevin pointed out, 'after the Unions have fought the Communists and struggled with the employers, the Government now seems to be siding with the latter, and in fact, however much it may be covered up, advantage is being taken to interfere with the basic principles of the scheme, and in this the employers are supported by the Ministry of Transport.' In apparently supporting this attack on the Scheme by sanctioning an inquiry, Bevin told Isaacs that the Government was jeopardising its relationship with the Union: 'I see in this problem all

⁴⁵PRO: PREM 8/1534, Meeting in Prime Minister's Room in the House of Commons, 5 May 1950.

the elements of a first-class difference between the Union and the Government, which will reflect itself in the industry and be very awkward indeed.' Given the immense bitterness felt by his TGWU comrades, Bevin urged Isaacs to limit the damage by confining the inquiry's terms of reference to the causes of unofficial strikes in the Port of London.⁴⁶

In the House of Commons on 11 May, Isaacs did announce that a formal inquiry would be held. But, in accordance with Bevin's wishes - and indeed as he himself had suggested on 5 May - the Committee of Inquiry appointed under Sir Frederick Leggett was commissioned on a narrower basis than that requested by Alfred Barnes. It was only to investigate the 'problem' of unofficial stoppages in the London docks, 'with a view to reporting what steps can be taken to avoid further unofficial action of the type that has taken place during the last three years and has proved so injurious to the trade of the country'.⁴⁷

Deakin was publicly relaxed about this development, telling journalists that as the Union had been given prior notice of the committee's terms of reference, he had never held any objection to its appointment.⁴⁸ The narrowing of the inquiry's terms of reference, had not, however, appreciably diminished the TGWU's bitterness. The leadership feared that the investigation, whilst undermining the Union's standing, would bolster that of the unofficial movement. On 15 May the TGWU Finance and General Purposes Committee agreed that the Union would give evidence to the Inquiry, but only on the strict understanding that 'there would be no question of the unofficial element being given a status in the hearings'.⁴⁹ Having subsequently given evidence to the Inquiry for the first time, Deakin assured colleagues on the Finance and General Purposes Committee that he had done so, having 'definitely laid down the principle that the Union did not regard itself as being on trial'.⁵⁰ In the meantime, Deakin contributed a lengthy article to the *Transport and General Workers' Record*, entitled, 'Docks and the Nation; Our Problem - We Can Find the Answer.' This strongly affirmed the Union's right to put its

⁴⁶PRO: FO 800/495, Bevin to Isaacs, 6 May 1950.

⁴⁷*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 475, 581, 11 May 1950.

⁴⁸*The Times*, 12 May 1950.

⁴⁹MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/28, TGWU Finance and General Purposes Committee, 15 May 1950.

⁵⁰MRC/MSS.126/T&G/1/1/28, TGWU Finance and General Purposes Committee, 29 June 1950.

own house in order. Deakin implied that the Government had been sorely mistaken in appointing the Leggett Committee, with Ministers swayed by the unjustified 'critical atmosphere' which guided present analysis of the Scheme. In restating the commitment of the workforce and the Union to the Scheme, he attempted also to ward off critics by emphasising the inestimable value of joint control: 'The unions stood for joint control. This is where we still stand and we shall remain in that position. Time has long passed when workers in industry are prepared to accept the idea that they are not entitled to have a "say" in the conditions under which their employment is regulated.'⁵¹

Deakin's principal anxiety, which Bevin had voiced in his representation on the Union's behalf to Isaacs, was that the employers would exploit the 'critical atmosphere' in which the Leggett hearings were being conducted, to secure Government support for the termination of joint control. The employers indeed took great satisfaction from Leggett's appointment. In pursuing increasingly confident overtures to the Government, the employers secured the support of Sir John Anderson, the former Conservative Cabinet Minister who in 1950 was Chairman of the Port of London Authority. As if to illustrate Victor Allen's argument that the interests of port authorities and port employers were effectively synonymous,⁵² on 15 May Anderson led a deputation of employers to discuss the Scheme's future with Attlee. Anderson envisaged the encounter, which was apparently arranged by his former Treasury official, D.H.F. Rickett, as a chance for port employers to set forth their ideas on how improved industrial relations in the docks could best be effected.⁵³ It would appear that Anderson approached this task with a spirit of confrontation rather than conciliation, for he included in his delegation Sir Basil Sanderson, the Shaw Savill Company Chairman whose most recent contribution to industrial relations in the London docks had been the dispute which he initiated with the Stevedores' Union. Anderson and Sanderson were joined by C.E. Wurtzburg of the British Chamber of Shipping and Sir William Currie of the P&O Steam Navigation Company, and Attlee was accompanied by Barnes, Isaacs and Rickett.

⁵¹*Transport and General Workers' Record*, June 1950.

⁵²V.L. Allen, *Trade Union Leadership*, p. 180.

⁵³PREM 8/1289, Anderson to Rickett, 8 May 1950.

Anderson spoke first, arguing that without an immediate restoration of the discipline which had collapsed in the docks, the Scheme would continue to operate ineffectively. As remedial action, he recommended three revisions to the Scheme: firstly, that the system of joint control be terminated; secondly, that the Government assume powers - by an Act of Parliament if necessary - to deal effectively with 'known agitators' in the docks, by imposing heavy fines or even imprisoning them; thirdly, that the legislation which framed the 1947 Scheme be amended so that men withholding their labour in an unofficial strike would be automatically expelled from the industry. Attlee spoke next, and attempted to defuse the employers' anger. Stating that the matter was one of great delicacy, given the communists' determination to exploit the differences between the respective sides of industry, he added that Anderson's observations would be fully considered by the Leggett Committee. Isaacs, predictably, was less emollient, restating his belief that problems in the docks owed little to specific failings of either the Scheme or the TGWU, but to the communists' undoubted determination to 'break the authority of the TGWU'. In referring to Anderson's proposals, he admitted the possibility of adding to the NDLB's independent representation, but dismissed the idea of ending joint control. He questioned also the efficacy of prosecuting or dismissing the thousands of men who could potentially be involved in an unofficial strike, to which Anderson responded by urging again that the Government should at least be able to remove the 'ringleaders' from the Scheme. The meeting ended there, with only one item subject to agreement: in view of the Inquiry already underway, neither side would make a statement to the press.⁵⁴

In limiting the scope of the Leggett Inquiry to unofficial strikes in London, and continuing to offer the type of strong support for the Union which he voiced in this meeting with Anderson and the employers, Isaacs clearly sought to paper over the cracks which were emerging in the Government's relationship with the TGWU. Yet, as has already been noted, the TGWU continued to resent the Leggett investigation, which necessarily drew attention to the Union's failure to exert authority amongst its dock members. When the report eventually appeared in May 1951, as a Command Paper, the TGWU was indirectly criticised on several points, most notably

⁵⁴PREM 8/1289, Meeting in Prime Minister's Room in the House of Commons, 15 May 1950.

that the association of Union officials with discipline had damaged their standing with the workforce.⁵⁵

In linking this criticism of the Union to the incidence of unofficial strikes, the report added weight to the employers' argument about the consequences of the Union's dual functions under the Scheme. This greatly infuriated the TGWU; yet at the same time its leaders saw an opportunity to bolster the popularity of joint control by appealing to their members' adversarial attitude to employers. Delivering his quarterly report to the Docks Trade Group in September 1951, Bird observed that the employers' response to the Leggett report had, predictably enough, been to emphasise its suggestion that joint control was the main cause of trouble. He urged the Union's officers to remind dock members that the employers were firmly opposed to joint control, and were seeking to 'force a change of the Scheme in their favour. It must be understood by all Officers and Members the Employers do not like the Scheme.'⁵⁶

Whilst the Leggett Committee's appointment - and subsequent report - simply intensified bitterness in the port transport industry, wider developments in the second half of 1950 appeared to assuage the Government's difficulties with the TGWU. Renewed international tension, stemming from the outbreak of war in Korea, was accompanied by a revival of the Government's pre-Leggett assumptions about the political character of unofficial strikes. This ostensibly restored the unity of the Government and the TGWU with regard to the causes of the docks unrest.

KOREA AND THE RENAISSANCE OF SUBVERSION

On 25 June 1950 North Korean forces invaded South Korea. The Labour Government responded by condemning the invasion as an unwarranted act of aggression; and on 27 June the United Kingdom strongly supported the United Nations Security Resolution - passed in the temporary absence of the Soviet delegate - which urged the repulsion by force of the North Korean troops. The British Government believed that the Korean war signalled a genuine threat to international peace and Britain's own security, with Attlee fearing that the Soviet Union would exploit the

⁵⁵*Unofficial Stoppages in the London Docks. Report of a Committee of Inquiry*, (Cmd. 8236, May 1951), p.13.

⁵⁶DNTGC, Bird's Quarterly Report, 30 September 1951.

diversion of British and American troops to the Far East in order forcibly to press claims elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, Britain committed troops to Korea on the basis that the UN had to be given the teeth which had been lacking in the League of Nations.⁵⁷ After a trebling of defence estimates on 3 August, the Government ordered the landing in Korea of the first British battalions on 29 August.⁵⁸

With British troops committed in a war that aggravated existing fears about the perceived international communist threat, the Government regarded domestic industrial developments with increasing suspicion. In August Philip Noel-Baker, who by this time was Minister of Fuel and Power, drew Attlee's attention to the activities of Frank Foulkes, the communist who led the Electricians' Trade Union. According to Noel-Baker, along with other ETU leaders Foulkes had gone on a trip to Moscow, 'no doubt to get instructions'. Noel-Baker urged Attlee to remove 'active and suspected' communists from important positions in power stations.⁵⁹ The Government viewed industrial unrest in the docks with even more vigilance. An explosion in Portsmouth docks aboard a barge loaded with ammunition bound for Korea, which Royal Navy scientists in 1952 found to have been a complete accident,⁶⁰ was characterised by Attlee on 24 July in the House of Commons as a probable act of industrial sabotage.⁶¹ At the end of August unofficial pamphlets appeared in the London and Liverpool docks demanding the implementation of the TGWU's 'Dockers' Charter'.⁶² This was, of course, the package of unrealised demands for improved pay and conditions which the Union had voted for in August 1945, and which had under-pinned the huge unofficial strike of October 1945. National Dock Board officials believed that in order to drum up wider unofficial support for the Charter, Dickens and Timothy were planning to visit Glasgow, Grimsby and other northern ports.⁶³ This information was conveyed to the Ministry of Labour, and as Parliament re-convened in the middle of

⁵⁷Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, pp. 454-5.

⁵⁸Peter Hennessy, *Never Again. Britain 1945-1951*, p.466.

⁵⁹Morgan, *op.cit.*, p.437.

⁶⁰Justin Davis-Smith, *The Attlee and Churchill Administrations and Industrial Unrest 1945-1955*, p.17.

⁶¹*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 478, 35-37, 24 July 1950.

⁶²PRO: BK 2/79, copies of the Liverpool and London Port Workers Committees' untitled and undated pamphlets, filed by the National Dock Labour Board on 7 and 9 September 1950.

⁶³PRO: BK 2/79, Parkin to Gould, 28 August 1950.

September to discuss the Korean crisis, Isaacs advised Cabinet colleagues that communist-inspired strikes in the London docks were probably imminent. He based this assessment on the coincidence of the unofficial agitation for improved pay and conditions with a recent trip which three members of the unofficial movement had made to Poland. Estimating this venture in identical terms to Noel-Baker's evaluation of the Electricians' journey to Moscow, Isaacs said that the visitors to Warsaw, Timothy, Cowley and Copland, 'doubtless had been given a plan of campaign'.⁶⁴ The three men had indeed been to Poland, but their visit had hardly been the covert exercise which Isaacs's conspiracy-laden remarks implied. Rather it appears to have been a typical Communist Party-organised trip, designed to instil in members a conviction of the general superiority of life in the 'Popular Democracies'. Thus did the three write in glowing terms about their Polish experiences in the unofficial journal, *Port Workers' News*.⁶⁵

Having consulted his Cabinet colleagues, on 15 September Isaacs took his accusations to the House of Commons. Despite the almost certain innocence of the dockers' Polish trip, he cited it, 'at a time when our men are facing serious risks in Korea', as evidence that the unofficial movement was planning to interfere with military supplies.⁶⁶ For this effort Isaacs was damned with faint praise from his press critics, with *The Times* interpreting his statement as evidence, 'that the Government are for once making ready to meet the threat instead of waiting until a serious stoppage has again been engineered by the agitators'.⁶⁷

The Government's response to the Korean crisis and the renewal of unofficial activity in the docks enjoyed the TGWU's full support. In August its General Executive Council resolved, 'that we must stand right up to aggression from whatever quarter it comes and not allow the United Nations Organisation to fall by the wayside.' Such were the circumstances surrounding the initiation of hostilities by 'Communist Imperialism', that the Government's 'great scheme of re-armament', regrettable though it

⁶⁴PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)58, 14 September 1950.

⁶⁵PRO: BK 2/79, copy of *Port Workers' News*, October 1950. As an example of the favourable impressions which the three recorded, Timothy, who described himself as a Roman Catholic, stated that in Poland religious freedom was absolute.

⁶⁶*Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 478, 1405, 15 September 1950.

⁶⁷*The Times*, 16 September 1950.

was, would enjoy the Union's full support.⁶⁸ The debate about unofficial activity and political subversion which Isaacs began with his Commons statement on 15 September, was intensified by Deakin on the following day. When Harry Pollitt, the Communist Party's General Secretary, issued a statement calling for a change in the TGWU's leadership, Deakin said that the Government should introduce legislation to ban the Communist Party: 'The party is not a political party in the sense that British people know politics. It is a conspiracy against the country and the British people.'⁶⁹ In the *Transport and General Workers' Record*, Deakin added that the demands being put forward in the docks for the Dockers' Charter were part of this conspiracy, and were a front for agitation which was actually designed to disrupt the supply of war materials to Malaya as well as Korea.⁷⁰

In calling for a ban on the CP, the Union took a harder line than the Government, with Ministers deciding at the end of September that British public opinion would not tolerate such a move.⁷¹ Yet coming hard on the heels of Isaacs's speech, Deakin's pugnacity indicated that the TGWU and the Government once again shared a public determination to characterise the unofficial movement as a subversive body. Thus, any outstanding difficulties between Labour's political and industrial partners arising from the establishment of the Leggett Committee, were apparently resolved. However, the general concurrence of opinion that the agitation for the 'Docker's Charter' in September 1950 was politically-motivated, in the longer term actually increased pressure on Government-TGWU relations. This renewal of tension arose from the Government's growing conviction that a political problem required a political solution.

Amongst the Attlee Governments' literally dozens of ad-hoc committees, in July 1950 a Ministerial group was established to draft a bill entitled Overseas Operations (Security of Forces). The purpose of this intended legislation was spelt out in a paper which Chuter Ede presented at the Committee's second meeting on 31 July. Ede proposed to criminalise all industrial acts - whether sabotage of the type supposedly witnessed at Portsmouth, unofficial strikes or incitement to strike - deemed prejudicial

⁶⁸MSS.126/T&G/1/1/28, TGWU General Executive Council, General Secretary's Quarterly Report, 21 August 1950.

⁶⁹*The Times*, 18 September 1950.

⁷⁰*Transport and General Workers' Record*, October-November 1950.

⁷¹PRO: CAB 130/63, General Purposes Committee, 29 September 1950.

to the conduct of the war effort.⁷² Given this emphasis on an act of sabotage which was subsequently proved to have not actually taken place, the intended Bill was clearly ill-conceived. This the Committee acknowledged at its next meeting, two months later, with one Minister pointing out that since the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, there had been no further attempt to prevent supplies from being dispatched in support of military operations. However, given the unsettled nature of international developments and the likelihood of prolonged UN operations 'against aggression', the Committee remained committed to the idea of taking out some kind of legal insurance against unofficial action. Thus, whilst ruling out the suppression of the Communist Party, Shawcross and Isaacs both wondered whether a viable alternative might be to enlist TUC support for a permanent measure, based on Order 1305, which would outlaw unofficial strikes.⁷³

The continued existence of the 1940 regulation represented a vexing problem for the Government. On 16 October Sir Hartley Shawcross pointed to trouble ahead, informing Cabinet that so long as the Order remained in operation, he would find it increasingly difficult to refrain from using it. An inconclusive discussion followed, with Bevin arguing against maintaining compulsory arbitration in the longer-term.⁷⁴

This indecision on unofficial strikes reflected the Government's general inability to take effective legal action against opponents of the war in Korea. On 6 November Shawcross told Cabinet that the only way to suppress the anti-war propaganda which was regularly appearing in the *Daily Worker*, would be to institute a prosecution for treason. But as this offence carried a mandatory death sentence, Ministers naturally concurred that it was far too heavy a weapon to use.⁷⁵ The possibility that the *Daily Worker* might be prosecuted under new legislation had already been eliminated, when the relevant Cabinet Committee had decided not to proceed with the Overseas Operations Bill on 3 November. However, in ruling out tougher measures against anti-war propaganda, the Committee reiterated its insistence that the continuation of unofficial action was not

⁷²Ibid., 31 July 1950.

⁷³Ibid., 29 September 1950.

⁷⁴PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)64, 16 October 1950.

⁷⁵PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)71, 6 November 1950.

permissible.⁷⁶ For these Ministers, the attitude of their Trade Union partners was unacceptably complacent. In September Shawcross had written to Morrison in order to qualify Isaacs's recent assertion that unofficial action was primarily a political problem. According to Shawcross, most of communism's industrial initiatives since 1945 had only been possible because of the TGWU's inactivity. He had added that the maintenance of unofficial committees beyond the span of strikes was, 'a most dangerous situation requiring the Union to take really stringent steps'.⁷⁷

For Shawcross and others, frustration caused by the Union's inactivity continued to mount. In lieu of an agreed strategy to counter unofficial strikes, on 16 October Cabinet had decided to open up discussions with the TUC on two questions: firstly, how were further communist-inspired strikes to be prevented; and secondly, how was machinery for long-term negotiation of industrial settlements to be developed.⁷⁸ Isaacs and Morrison duly discussed these matters with TUC leaders over an informal dinner in a London restaurant on 22 November, but no new proposals were produced. This confirmed the Government's growing suspicion that the Unions were either unable or unwilling to initiate action against unofficial strikes.⁷⁹

The debate precipitated by the Korean crisis about the supposedly subversive nature of unofficial action in the docks, had thus reinforced the Government's conviction, evident during the Expulsions strike of April 1950, that the TGWU could no longer be relied upon to prevent unofficial strikes and enforce effective discipline in the docks. These were matters which the Government itself would have to assume responsibility for. In November Shawcross gave notice of the means by which the Government would eventually seek to improve discipline in the docks, by carrying out his threat to institute legal proceedings under Order 1305. Following a ten-day unofficial strike by North Thames Gas Board workers in London gas stations, ten men were prosecuted and sentenced to a month's imprisonment, which was reduced on appeal to a £50 fine.⁸⁰ The Ministry

⁷⁶PRO: CAB 130/63, General Purposes Committee, 3 November 1950.

⁷⁷PRO: CAB 124/1196, Shawcross to Morrison, 15 September 1950.

⁷⁸PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)64, 16 October 1950.

⁷⁹PRO: LAB 43/152, Isaacs to Morrison, 28 November 1950.

⁸⁰Morgan, *op.cit.*, p.437.

of Labour considered that the original prison sentences were a great shock both to trade unionists and the general public.⁸¹ In December, following a dispute between members of the Electricians' Trade Union and the airline company BOAC, Cabinet considered additional prosecutions. An unofficial strike had begun after BOAC had attempted to force electricians to work alongside two non-union members, and Ministers pointed out that the criminal prosecution of trade unionists who refused to work with non-trade unionists, would jeopardise relations with the Trade Unions.⁸² During a second Cabinet discussion of the subject, which rejected prosecutions, the wider difficulties of enforcing Order 1305 were raised.⁸³ These had long been recognised. Shortly after the Order's introduction in 1940, Sir Frederick Leggett - in his then position as Chief Industrial Commissioner at the Ministry of Labour - had warned Bevin that it would be virtually impossible to enforce the legal ban on strikes and lock-outs. The Order would have to serve as a 'substantial deterrent' only, for: 'A large number of workpeople cannot be sent to prison and it is undesirable to make martyrs by selecting a few for prosecution.'⁸⁴ Leggett's initial misgivings had been borne out by the Coalition Government's futile 1942 attempt to prosecute 1,200 miners who struck work at Betteshanger Colliery in Kent. Thwarted in their attempts to collect fines which the miners refused to pay, local magistrates had also been unable to imprison the men for lack of gaol accommodation.⁸⁵

With Shawcross insisting that so long as the Order remained law, and so long as he remained responsible for upholding the law, he would have to enforce it again sooner or later, in January 1951 Cabinet decided to consider the regulation's future. In the absence of any other instrument for dealing with unofficial strikes, Herbert Morrison's influential Private Secretary, E.M. Nicholson, urged that it be retained. Nicholson, who in October 1950 had described industrial unrest as 'a kind of social disease',⁸⁶ told Morrison on 13 January that a permanent anti-strike settlement was plainly indispensable: 'In modern social and economic conditions a strike is

⁸¹PRO: LAB 10/1006, Memorandum on Order 1305 for Minister, 24 January 1951.

⁸²PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)83, 7 December 1950.

⁸³PRO: CAB 128/CM(50)83, 11 December 1950.

⁸⁴PRO: LAB 10/116, Leggett to Bevin, 8 September 1940.

⁸⁵Henry Phelps Brown, *The Origins of Trade Union Power*, pp. 98-9.

⁸⁶PRO: CAB 124/1194, Nicholson to Morrison, 26 October 1950.

just as anti-social and almost as obsolete a method of settling disputes as a duel between two individuals.' The Ministry of Labour had to emphasise that strikes and lock-outs were not part of a rational future, 'and any implication that compulsory arbitration is an exceptional and temporary measure pending the restoration of the right to strike should be firmly resisted.'⁸⁷ Two days later, Cabinet decided broadly in favour of maintaining a permanent system of arbitration machinery, emphasising that it, 'would be undesirable to delete the provisions of the Order relating to the prohibition of strikes and lock-outs.' In the wake of the BOAC and gas disputes, it was conceded that disputes relating to recognition or non-unionism ought to be excluded from the Order's scope, and that breaches of the Order would be punishable only by fines and not by prison sentences.⁸⁸

With Cabinet evidently coming round to the position held by the Attorney General, that the law would have to be used persistently against unofficial strikers, a further step had been taken away from the idea that unofficial action was a matter to be dealt with by the Trade Unions internally. On 17 January Isaacs was moved to the Ministry of Pensions and replaced as Minister of Labour by Aneurin Bevan. This marked another significant breach to the 'separate spheres' approach. In contrast to his predecessor, Bevan had recurrently demonstrated his impatience with the TGWU's attempts to impose discipline amongst recalcitrant dock workers. As recently as the previous April, he had argued that legal action against several thousand striking men in London would prove to be a 'wholesome long-term deterrent'. Attlee's biographer has suggested that Bevan was appointed Minister of Labour for three related reasons. He would have to support the Government's economic policy, and thus be forced to confront rather than lead its left-wing critics; and in this new defensive role he would be confirmed through having 'to come to terms with the powerful right-wing trade union leaders'.⁸⁹ In fact, Bevan's three month career as Minister of Labour hardly fulfilled any of these criteria, the most patent departure from Attlee's plan being his celebrated resignation from the Government on 21 April over the NHS spending cuts. However, Bevan's one significant act as Labour Minister, did owe something to Attlee's intention that the Ministry's new occupant would absorb left-wing criticism of the

⁸⁷PRO: CAB 124/1195, Nicholson to Morrison, 13 January 1951.

⁸⁸PRO: CAB 128/CM(51)3, 15 January 1951.

⁸⁹Harris, *op.cit.*, p.470.

Government. Paradoxically, however, it also revived the tension between the Government and the TGWU that had first explicitly emerged in May 1950.

THE FAILURE OF LEGAL SANCTIONS

Bevan's arrival at the Ministry of Labour coincided with the conclusion by the National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry of a new pay agreement. With TUC support for the wage freeze collapsing in September 1950, on 16 November Arthur Bird notified employers' representatives that the TGWU wished to open negotiations for a pay increase. He observed that the present agreement had lasted for five years, and had been greatly overtaken by a 21 per cent increase in the cost of living. The employers responded by suggesting that Bird's request had been directly influenced by the recent unofficial agitation for the Dockers' Charter, a charge which Bird explicitly denied.⁹⁰ Despite the employers' initial resistance, negotiations did proceed, and in January the NJC reached agreement on a flat-rate increase of 2s per day, thus increasing the guaranteed daily minimum to 21s. On 31 January a special meeting of the TGWU National Docks Trade Group Committee recommended that the award be accepted, and the agreement was adopted by the National Docks Delegate Conference which gathered on 1 February.⁹¹

With the settlement again falling short of the Docker's Charter's central tenet, a daily guarantee of 25s, the Merseyside unofficial movement immediately called for a protest strike. Although relatively prolonged, support for the ensuing stoppage on the Mersey was much thinner than when the Charter had previously been invoked, in October 1945. The seventeen day affair cost the industry more than 100,000 days, but this figure suggests that only approximately one-fifth of the 18,000 or so Merseyside workers supported it.⁹² Attempts to give the strike a national footing comparable to 1945 were also unsuccessful. According to Jack Dash, the Birkenhead strike committee contacted members of the London Port Workers' Committee by telephone, and asked for support. The London

⁹⁰PRO: BK 2/283, National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry, 16 November 1950.

⁹¹MSS.126/T&G/1/1/29, TGWU Finance and General Purposes Committee, 15 February 1951.

⁹²PRO: BK 2/71, Industrial Disputes 1951.

committee were fairly sure that very few London men were interested in striking over the settlement, but in a spirit of loyalty to their Mersey comrades, they nevertheless organised a mass meeting on 6 February. The London committee's reservations were fully justified, as only 500 men attended the meeting and only a few hundred more supported the unofficial strike which began in the Royal Docks, also on 6 February. Indeed, Dash emphasised that the general lack of support for the six day strike was unprecedented,⁹³ and only 16,000 working days were lost. Additional unofficial action against the new wage agreement began on 5 February in Manchester; lasting eight days, this strike cost the industry a further 16,500 days.⁹⁴

The Cabinet's Ministerial Emergencies Committee discussed these developments at 9.30 am on Wednesday 7 February. Five Ministers were present: Ede, Bevan, Shawcross, Barnes and Hector McNeil, the Secretary of State for Scotland. Whilst Shawcross indicated that there was sufficient evidence to allow criminal proceedings against the London and Liverpool strike leaders under Order 1305, Ede reported that their attempts to spread the strikes had failed. Nevertheless, the Ministers concluded that the very fragility of the unofficial movement meant that, for once, prosecutions would weaken rather than strengthen its position with the rank and file. Shawcross was authorised to institute prosecutions against the appropriate individuals in the event of the respective unofficial committees' failing to terminate their strikes that afternoon.⁹⁵

Both of Bevan's distinguished biographers have explicitly distanced Bevan from this decision to prosecute the strike leaders. In refuting Bessie Braddock's assertion that during the meeting of 7 February Bevan had stated, 'the strikers are on their knees, now is the time to strike them', Michael Foot noted, 'No one knew better than Bevan what might be the dangers for the Labour Government of the involvement of other Ministers in the decision about a prosecution which rested solely with the Attorney-General.' Foot added that it was actually Hector McNeil who argued in favour of delivering a knock out blow to the strikers.⁹⁶ John Campbell's version of events simply has Shawcross ordering the prosecutions,

⁹³Jack Dash, *Good Morning Brothers!*, pp. 80-2.

⁹⁴PRO: BK 2/71, Industrial Disputes 1951.

⁹⁵PRO: CAB 134/177, EC, 7 February 1951.

⁹⁶Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan. Volume Two 1945-1960*, pp.318-19.

apparently without consulting any of his Ministerial colleagues.⁹⁷ Each of these biographers have dismissed too readily the support which Bevan surely gave - and there is nothing in the minutes of the meeting to suggest that he did otherwise - to the case for prosecutions in the Emergencies Committee. Moreover, his compliance with Ede and Shawcross in accepting that the TGWU was itself incapable of dealing with the problem, was in marked contrast with the line usually adopted by Isaacs. On frequent occasions during unofficial strikes the latter had restrained colleagues from premature action, urging that the Union be given the maximum opportunity to reassert its own authority.

As the Labour Government's leading socialist, Bevan at first sight might appear to be an unlikely supporter of tough strike-breaking measures. But the man who had been expelled from the Labour Party in 1939 for sponsoring a Popular Front with communists,⁹⁸ was now operating in a very different post-war world. It was as a passionate defender of democratic socialism that he urged the dispatch of land troops to break the communist blockade of Berlin in June 1948;⁹⁹ and his frequent advocacy of tough measures against unofficial strikers was couched in similar terms. There was no contradiction between Bevan's socialist convictions and his opposition to unofficial strike action, as his remarks about the 'sectionalism' of the unofficial dockers' movement indicated. Those who threatened the unity of the labour movement, he argued when criticising the London dock strike in July 1949, jeopardised the security of its future, and allowed the Tories the prospect of regaining power.¹⁰⁰ In 1951, with the Labour majority in the House of Commons reduced to only five, the threat which unofficial action posed to the Labour Government, and therefore to the continuing project of establishing a democratic socialist Britain, was all the more pervasive. In further explaining Bevan's determination to confront the unofficial movement, a useful parallel might be drawn with the White Paper introduced by a subsequent Labour Government in 1969, *In Place of Strife*, which was widely perceived to limit Trade Unionism's freedoms. The White Paper's author was the one-time Bevanite Barbara Castle, herself one of the few prominent left-wingers in

⁹⁷John Campbell, *Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism*, p.224.

⁹⁸Ibid., pp.82-3.

⁹⁹Foot, op. cit., p.230.

¹⁰⁰For instance, Bevan's speech to the annual Northumbrian miners' picnic at Morpeth, reported by the *Manchester Guardian*, 18 July 1949.

Wilson's administration. Castle shared Bevan's determination to eliminate unofficial strikes which, they both believed, advanced sectional aims with two consequences: firstly, they disrupted the Labour movement's unity; and secondly, they threw any attempts at strategic economic planning by a Labour Government into chaos. More notoriously than Bevan, however, Castle provoked intense opposition from Union leaders who believed that it was not for the Government to arm itself against unofficial strikes, which they continued to regard as a matter of internal union discipline. Deprived of support from Cabinet colleagues in the face of such stiff TUC opposition - the most notable defector being the 'Keeper of the Cloth Cap', James Callaghan - Castle's proposals fell to the ground in June 1969.¹⁰¹ In 1951 Bevan and his Government colleagues experienced nothing like the hostility which Castle endured in 1969. However, the prosecutions which followed the Emergencies Committee on 7 February did greatly antagonise the TGWU leadership which, like the TUC in 1969, strongly believed that the Government had no proper place in imposing industrial discipline upon union members.

With the unofficial stoppages continuing on 7 February, Shawcross ordered the arrests of seven alleged ringleaders. Three of the men - Robert Crosbie, Joseph Harrison and William Johnson - were from the Mersey ports. The other four were familiar names from the London unofficial movement: the two expelled TGWU men, Harry Constable and Ted Dickens; Joseph Cowley, reprimanded in February 1949 by the TGWU Executive for his role in the 1948 strike, and a visitor to Poland several months previously; and Cowley's fellow traveller to Poland, Albert Timothy, the Stevedore who had chaired the 1949 lock-out committee. On the evening of 8 February these seven were arrested at a pub in the Stepney area of London, taken to Bow Street Police Station,¹⁰² and charged thus: 'on and between 8 October 1950 and 6 February 1951, they conspired with other persons unknown to incite dock workers to take part in strikes in connection with trade disputes,' this action being illegal under Order

¹⁰¹Barbara Castle, *Fighting All The Way*, pp.413-21. This marvellous characterisation of Callaghan was provided by Peter Jenkins, cited in Minkin, *op.cit.*, p.112.

¹⁰²Dash, *op.cit.*, p.83.

1305.¹⁰³ The men were held overnight, but released the next morning on bail, pending an appearance at Bow Street Police Court on 20 February.

Far from weakening the relationship between the unofficial movement and the workforce as Ministers had intended, the arrests actually increased support for the original strike which had been petering out. On 9 February Ministers found that virtually nobody was working in London's Royal Docks, where 10,000 men were usually employed.¹⁰⁴ Workers in all ports except Birkenhead and Liverpool went back to work on or around 13 February, but the London unofficial committee resolved to take a further course of one day strikes to coincide with the accused men's court appearances. Thus on 20 February, when the seven appeared briefly at the Bow Street Police Court, one day strikes affected work in London, Manchester, Glasgow and Greenock. With the London committee adopting the slogan, 'When They're in the Dock, We're out of the Dock!'¹⁰⁵, subsequent hearings of the case were accompanied by strikes in London on 27 February, 16 March, 9 and 16-19 April. Whilst the general Mersey stoppages were called off after 20 February, dockers at Birkenhead supported the three day strike in London. From 20 February until the trial's conclusion, the Government's decision to prosecute the seven cost the industry an approximate total of 70,000 working days in all ports.¹⁰⁶

Given the obvious relationship between the case of the seven and the renewed incidence of unofficial activity, the TGWU did not view the Government's initiative favourably. Whilst the Government's previous intrusion into internal Union disciplinary matters, the appointment of the Leggett Committee of Inquiry, had only taken place after Bevin had attempted to smooth the ground with Deakin, the arrests on 8 February had taken the Union completely by surprise. Deakin told colleagues that his first intimation of the legal initiative had not come from labour movement colleagues in Government, but when he had read about it in the newspapers on 9 February.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³MSS.126/T&G/1/1/29, TGWU Finance and General Purposes Committee, Docks Group: National Wage Settlement Report, 15 February 1951.

¹⁰⁴PRO: CAB 134/177, EC, 9 February 1951.

¹⁰⁵Dash, *op.cit.*, p.83.

¹⁰⁶PRO: BK 2/71, Industrial Disputes, 1951.

¹⁰⁷MSS.126/T&G/1/1/29, TGWU General Executive Council, General Secretary's Quarterly Report, 5 March 1951.

In November 1950, Deakin had argued that the Union was facing a war on two fronts. Not only was it targeted by communists who saw it as the major obstacle to increased communist influence in the TUC, but in supporting the Labour Government the Union also faced heavy criticism from Beaverbrook's Tory press.¹⁰⁸ This had, of course, been the basis of Deakin's disappointment with the Government over the Leggett Inquiry. Having fought successfully against two of the Labour Government's principal opponents, the communists and the port employers, the Union had not expected to have attention drawn to its own alleged shortcomings. Now, in March 1951, Deakin was angered by the opportunities which the Government had once again presented to both opposition groups. Deakin rightly insisted in the Union's Executive meeting of 8 March that, without the arrests, there would have been no serious trouble. Thus the Government had inadvertently aided the unofficial movement's attack on the Union leadership. Deakin evidently viewed this attack with great bitterness, stating, 'I know the drive is against me personally.'¹⁰⁹ Whilst the communist elements had drawn comfort from the on-going court proceedings, Deakin added that the trial had allowed employers to reopen debate about the joint administration of the Dock Labour Scheme. He implied that members of the Government who believed joint control to be a source of trouble in the docks were actively supporting the port employers against the Union.¹¹⁰

Meanwhile, the case of the seven accused dock workers was lurching towards its conclusion. The final hearings began at the Old Bailey on 9 April under Lord Chief Justice Goddard, with Shawcross prosecuting on behalf of the Government. Shawcross disingenuously opened by asking the jurors not to be swayed by the possibility that sinister communist forces were at work in the docks, for no doubt 'the accused men had a deep and sincere belief in the justice of their demands'. However, in pursuit of these demands, they had been 'prepared to hold the nation to ransom and defy the law of the land'.¹¹¹ The seven faced two main charges: firstly, and most significantly, that they had conspired to incite dock workers to strike in connection with a trade dispute, contrary to the law under Order 1305;

¹⁰⁸*Transport and General Workers' Record*, October-November 1950.

¹⁰⁹MSS.126/T&G/1/1/29, TGWU General Executive Council, 8 March 1951.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹¹*The Times*, 10 April 1951.

secondly, that 'otherwise than in contemplation or furtherance of a trade dispute', they had conspired to induce men to break their obligations under the Dock Labour Scheme by absenting themselves from work without the permission of their employers. On 18 April the jury declared that the seven were guilty on this second count; but, apparently uncertain that the strike had actually involved a 'trade dispute' - and for a successful prosecution under Order 1305 this definition was absolutely essential - announced its failure to agree on the first one. Stating the impossibility of reconciling a disagreement on the first charge with the verdict on the second charge, Shawcross had to discontinue proceedings. He entered a *nolle prosequi*, and the men were acquitted. Pressed on this subject recently by Anthony Howard, Shawcross said that the jury's 'perverse verdict' was greeted with considerable relief by some of his Government colleagues, who had held 'mixed feelings' about prosecuting the men. He added that the outcome was welcomed 'with great triumph by the dissident trade unionists who were gathered outside'.¹¹² Led by a jubilant Jack Dash, several hundred dockers carried the acquitted men shoulder high through the streets of London,¹¹³ and the Ministry of Labour's London regional officer gloomily recorded that the case's 'damp squib' conclusion had been interpreted by dockers as 'a victory for "collective action"'.¹¹⁴ Bevan, who had been discussing Order 1305's future with representatives from both sides of industry on the Ministry of Labour-sponsored Joint Consultative Committee,¹¹⁵ decided that the regulation would have to be abolished. This was duly accomplished by his successor as Minister of Labour, Alfred Robens. In June 1951 Robens informed Frank Soskice, who had become Attorney General after Shawcross was appointed President of the Board of Trade on 24 April, that the Order was no longer operable, as the Unions were no longer prepared to support it. Together Robens and Soskice compiled a replacement, Order 1376, which made provision for legally-enforceable arbitration in disputes, without prohibiting strikes and lock-outs.¹¹⁶ This new regulation was approved by Cabinet on 26 July.¹¹⁷

¹¹²'Brothers', broadcast BBC Radio 4, 5 January 1993.

¹¹³Dash, *op.cit.*, p.87.

¹¹⁴PRO: LAB 10/1039, London RIRO, departmental memo, 18 April 1951.

¹¹⁵PRO: LAB 10/1006, Joint Consultative Committee, 24 January and 4 April 1951.

¹¹⁶Morgan, *op.cit.*, p.439.

¹¹⁷PRO: CAB 128/CM(51)55, 26 July 1951.

The decision to prosecute the seven dockers had backfired completely. Where the unofficial movement had been facing its first serious defeat, with very few dockers interested in a strike over the new wage agreement, the trial ultimately brought it a highly publicised victory. This victory certainly caused sufficient tremors within the TGWU for Deakin and Bird to request a vote of confidence from the Union's Docks Trade Group Committee, which they received on 19 April.¹¹⁸ In addition, the trial, in drawing renewed public attention to the TGWU's problems in the docks, had placed fresh pressure on the Government's relationship with the Union at an extremely inopportune moment. It was a bitter coda to Ernest Bevin's life that at the time of his death - Saturday, 14 April 1951 - members of the Union which he had created and led for twenty years, were being prosecuted by the Labour Government. On 21 April the Government was further shaken by the resignation of the Minister of Labour, Aneurin Bevan. Bevan's opposition to the rearmament package had, as Morgan demonstrates, been privately stated as early as 1 August 1950.¹¹⁹ But Morgan also believes that the unaccustomed criticism from the left which Bevan encountered as a result of the dockers' prosecutions, 'had a direct bearing on his later response to the issue of National Health Service charges'.¹²⁰ Indeed, it was at a public meeting primarily attended by London dockers at Bermondsey on 3 April, that Bevan first hinted in public that he would resign on this matter. Responding to a heckler he said, 'I will never be a member of a Government which makes charges on the National Health Service.'¹²¹ This suggests then, that in addition to straining the patience of the TGWU leadership, the Government-instigated crisis in the docks had also significantly influenced Bevan's eventual resignation. With Gaitskell's chief critics, Bevan and Wilson, no longer in Cabinet, there was little further resistance to the over-inflated rearmament package that proved to be the Government's ultimate undoing.¹²²

¹¹⁸DNTGC, 19 April 1951.

¹¹⁹Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour People*, p.214.

¹²⁰Morgan, *Labour in Power*, p.440.

¹²¹Michael Foot, *op cit.*, p.320.

¹²²Morgan, *op.cit.*, pp. 477-8.

CONCLUSION

The developments in the docks which have been discussed in the preceding chapters re-emphasise the general observations which were made about the 1945 Labour Government in the first chapter. To recap, the Government set itself two central tasks, economic recovery and the international containment of communism. In pursuing these goals it was greatly supported by the TUC, which, given the labour alliance's informal 'rules' of behaviour, accepted responsibility for marshalling working class support behind both the wage freeze and anti-communism. As the first chapter further indicated, historians have broadly recognised this important contribution which the labour alliance made to the successes of the 1945-51 Governments. Peter Hennessy, for instance, describes the TUC's support for the wage freeze as, 'a measure of the never-to-be-repeated unity of the labour movement.'¹ However, the subsequent chapters also demonstrated that historians have been slow to acknowledge an equally important feature of the 1945-51 labour alliance, namely the tension between the 1950 Government and its largest union ally, the Transport and General Workers' Union. This slow build up of tension arose not so much from the 1945 strike - when the Government's response to the largest strike was relatively relaxed - but from subsequent strikes in the 1945-50 period, with disruption in this vital area of the industrial economy holding obvious implications with regard to the Government's increasingly urgent economic and international priorities.

The Government characterised these later strikes as communist conspiracies, but they actually had nothing to do with political subversion. The real causes of the strikes - direct and indirect - were industrial in character. Chapters four and five related the fact that the 1948 and 1949 stoppages - like the huge 1945 strike - were directly produced by a difference of opinion between the TGWU and some of its dock members on a specifically industrial issue. In Chapter Six, the underlying causes of the strikes were discussed: poor amenities, the persistence of casual recruitment, the workforce's antipathy to the new discipline introduced by the Dock Labour Scheme, the TGWU's unpopular association with this discipline, and the particular working culture of the docks, where workers traditionally relied on each other rather than the Union. These too, denoted

¹Peter Hennessy, *Never Again. Britain 1945-1951*, p.382.

industrial, as opposed to political, problems. Yet the Governments' wider priorities were such that Ministers expended little sympathy on dockers who went on strike. In disrupting economic activity, the strikes seemed to delay the process of Western European economic stabilisation, which - in concert with American and Western European allies - the Government perceived as the first step to halting communism's post-war progress. In a prospering Europe, it was believed, the ground would be cut from underneath communism's feet.² The Government duly regarded the unofficial movement with great hostility, and viewed the TGWU's inability to maintain discipline amongst its docks membership with mounting frustration. It was this frustration which persuaded the 1950 Government to establish an inquiry into the London unofficial strikes in 1950, and then to order the prosecution of the seven dockers in 1951. These actions blatantly contradicted the labour alliance's 'rules', and although predictable, the ensuing annoyance felt by the TGWU leadership was immensely significant. In evincing tension between the Government and Arthur Deakin, its most loyal trade union supporter, the docks-related developments certainly qualify the conventional historical understanding of the general relationship between the 1945-51 Governments and the Unions.

At the same time, however, it should be noted that these strains were largely self-inflicted. In disregarding the industrial origins of the unofficial strikes, and instead emphasising their allegedly political characteristics, the Government created trouble for itself. George Isaacs continually sought to excuse the TGWU for failing to maintain order in the docks by arguing that the trouble was inspired by Deakin's communist opponents in the docks. Yet by drawing attention to the Union's internal weaknesses, this only served to convince Isaacs's Cabinet colleagues that they themselves would have to take action against the strikers. That Ministers would have to intervene in a more active manner than simply deploying troops to maintain supplies, was also in some ways made inevitable by the Government's increasingly strident public attitude to the strikes. Eventually, and following some particularly reckless Ministerial statements which were made after the outbreak of war in Korea, the

²David W. Ellwood, *Rebuilding Europe. Western Europe, America and Postwar Reconstruction*, p.92.

Government was obliged to take action commensurate with the assertion that dock strikes were a political rather than an industrial challenge.

The Government caused the Union a great deal of embarrassment by establishing the Leggett Inquiry and taking the seven dockers to court, for both of these developments brought public attention to the Union's problems in the docks. The Union was clearly anxious to divert attention from its inability to command authority in the docks, especially as its critics cited the TGWU's assumption of managerial responsibilities under the Dock Labour Scheme as being the hub of the problem. Having fought long and hard for the Scheme, the Union was understandably sensitive to attacks upon it, particularly as much of the criticism came from the port employers. This criticism of the Union's role in the Scheme was, in any case, misplaced. The port employers' position, shared by the Ministry of Transport, was that industrial relations in the docks had deteriorated as a result of the Scheme. Yet such indiscipline was not simply a mechanical consequence of the Union's participation in the Scheme's managerial or disciplinary functions, however unpopular this was with Union members. The deeper explanation - the real cause of the trouble - was the Union's long-term inability to put down solid organisational roots in the docks. As John Lovell has shown, history always counted for much in the closed world of the docks, and history was always working against the TGWU.³

This real situation was no less damning for the Union, and its persistent attempts to deflect attention from its historical weakness meant that, although the Government's actions in 1950 and 1951 were insensitive, the later tension was largely of the Union's own making. Whilst the Government may have been under pressure from the British secret services to accept that the strikes were communist conspiracies, and the obvious absence of documentary evidence means that this can neither be established nor ruled out, one definite source of red plot rumours was the TGWU. It is highly significant that whilst police and Government law officers generally dismissed evidence of political involvement, the TGWU continually encouraged the public and the Government to believe that there was an important political dimension to the unofficial strikes. In insisting that the dockers' unofficial movement was politically motivated, Deakin inadvertently induced the Government to respond in a 'political' manner. Given that Deakin took this position in order to ease the pressure

³John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers*, especially pp.214-18.

on his Union, and given the strain which the Government's eventual response placed the labour alliance under, this was an ironic, and ultimately unfortunate situation.

APPENDICES

[I] Transcript of notes of conversation between Cyril Smith, Terry Brotherstone and Jim Phillips, Edinburgh, 5 August 1992.

WW II: Given the opposition of British Trotskyists to the war effort, I asked Cyril what position British Trotskyists intended to take in the event of Nazi invasion. He said that the position was to arm the workers, who would fight fascism; in 1940 there was little difference between 'democratic capitalism' and 'fascist capitalism', other than the willingness of 'democratic workers' to fight fascism. I asked about Trotskyists' attitude towards the British army. Terry stated that Trotskyists believed that the forces would save the working class if they were rid of the 'officer class' which had been responsible for the collapse of France.

1945: Cyril said he was a teenager in the 1945, and his father was a great supporter of the Labour Government. Cyril's misgivings about the Government's viability (ie whether Labour in office was worth supporting) first arose when troops were used during the dock strike of October 1945. By 1949 his opposition to social democracy was absolute, and he attended the Trafalgar Square demonstration during the 1949 Canadian Seamen's strike.

Docks: Cyril recognised several names on the 1948 "'No Name' Organisation" list. He said that Harry Constable had left the CP in 1952, and become a Trotskyist. After being expelled from the TGWU, he had not joined the NASDU, and was the only London docker to be working without a Union card. No man would accept employment until 'Harry' had a job. Cyril confirmed my suggestion that employers co-operated in order to prevent the trouble that would have occurred had it appeared, as the unofficial movement had forecast in April 1950, that the expelled men were unemployable. Cyril said that Albert Timothy also 'tore up' his CP card in 1952, being fed up of the CP's attempts to subordinate dock interests to those of the Party. Of the unofficial leaders, he suggested that Ted Dickens was the only serious Communist. Jack Dash, for instance, was not really a serious intellectual figure, and in general communist dockers were theoretically illiterate. This reflected the relatively low-level of political consciousness amongst dockers as a whole. Whilst conversant in 'dockology', they were often extremely reactionary, racist etc.

[II] Text of letter from The Rt. Hon. Lord Callaghan of Cardiff, K.G. to Jim Phillips, 3 September 1992.

Dear Mr Phillips,

Thank you for your letter of 24 August in which you ask me to recall events that took place nearly half a century ago. I am afraid I have no recollection at all as to whether there was a difference between the Ministries of Labour and of Transport about the workings of the Dock Labour Scheme, but I can recall very clearly that the position I took up was derived, as you surmise, from my own experience in Cardiff, and my observations from visiting all the major ports in Britain. I would not accept your view that there was a climate of general dissatisfaction at the time in the docks. Certainly not in South Wales where the dockers regarded the Dock Labour Scheme as a very welcome reform. As you would expect, references to the disciplinary functions of the Scheme affected only a handful of dockers at any one time. The advent of the "Call Stand" removed much of the arbitrary nature of choosing dockers to work on a ship, and was certainly appreciated by the great number of men outside of what was called "The Blue Eyes". On the other hand, at all levels there was very slipshod management and long standing work practices had existed - for example in Liverpool - which could not be defended, and should not have been implemented. I refer, for example, to "Spelling".

As regards Mr. Attlee's proposal to establish an official Committee, as you may know, I left Transport and went to the Admiralty in February, 1950 and I have no recollection of what happened about the Committee and, of course, had no official standing at the time to follow it up.

As to the reason for my letter [his letter to Attlee, 15 July 1949], it derived from the fact that disciplinary features of the Scheme were not working well. Ernest Bevin, as a senior heavyweight figure in the Government, obviously carried many more guns than I did and I know from conversation with him at the time and later that he regarded the introduction of the Dock Labour Scheme as one of his great achievements. And almost certainly felt that his experience and judgement was both longer and better than mine. He may well have been right.

As regards your question as to whether the problems in the docks were related to the general dilemma facing the trade unions, you will certainly have discovered that the docks are always sui generis. At the time

I do not recall that the unions felt they were faced with a "general dilemma". Rather, they felt they were trying to work out a new partnership in the post-war atmosphere working hand in hand with a sympathetic government.

I hope your work will be very successful in throwing light on some of these matters.

Yours sincerely

James Callaghan

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